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スタンプ・トゥ・キル

神坂 一

富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト あらいすみるい

Slayers Special Volume 27

Stamp to Kill

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Lost Memory [Part 1]

I stood on the deserted highway, lost in thought. There is a saying that life is a series of choices. Small ones, big ones. Sometimes what I thought was a small choice ended up having a massive impact, and sometimes it was the other way around.

So, what about the thing right in front of me?

Weeds and withered leaves lined the side of the road. Lying face-up on top of them was a woman. She looked slightly older than me. Short black hair, blue clothes. I couldn't tell if the white cloth wrapped around her forehead was a bandana or a bandage.

If I were a kind-hearted traveler, I would have rushed over to help, but I stopped a few steps short. Her appearance was far too clean for someone who had collapsed from exhaustion or been a victim of a robbery. That was what bothered me. It was a tactic often used by bandits: pretend to be collapsed, wait for a kind soul to approach, then suddenly spring up and stab them—or have their cronies swarm out from nearby.

There was no guarantee this woman wasn't one of those types. I tried to sense the surroundings, but I felt no bloodlust from her. No weapons were visible in her hands, and there was no sign of anyone lurking nearby. In that case, was it some kind of trap where she had suppressed her presence?

While hesitating, I slowly approached.

"Ah... ugh...!"

Was she injured? She furrowed her brow and clutched her head.

"Um... I mean, I don't think this is the case, but... by any chance... could this be that 'amnesia' thing I've heard about in legends?"

".....Who are you...?"

"Uhm, just someone passing by."

"Where... is this...?"

She looked around again and muttered. This time, I was the one who furrowed my brow.

"It’s a highway, as you can see. It's between the town of Simia and the village of Lotus. Don't tell me you don't know why you're here?"

"Or rather....."

The woman raised her upper body with a start.

The space seemed to freeze with a snap. I am not bragging, but I, Lina Inverse, have plenty of reasons to be targeted by all sorts of people! I've spent my time voluntarily maintaining public order by smashing bandit groups and swiping their treasure, so I'm well-hated by them. In fact, I just decimated a bandit gang yesterday. Besides, when you're a beautiful teenage sorceress on a journey, your name tends to get exaggerated. There are plenty of losers who think they can make a name for themselves by taking me down.

I had read about it in some text that for some reason, people can temporarily or permanently lose part or all of their memories. But this was the first time I had actually seen someone like that.

According to that text, there's a thing called the 'O-Ko-Wa' to determine if someone has amnesia. In short, if someone asks the three-set question of 'Who are you?', 'Where is this?', and 'Who am I?', you can be sure they have amnesia, provided they aren't acting or joking.

Unfortunately, that text didn't mention what to do if you actually encountered such a person.

"Who... am I...?"

She looked up at me and whispered. I muttered an "Uh-huh," then raised my right hand.

"Well then, goodbye!"

I started walking away briskly—only for her to lunge and grab my right leg!

"Wait a minute! Why are you trying to leave like nothing happened!?"

"I mean, why are *you* asking me for help with such a natural look on your face!? It's because you lack that spirit of independence that old men always grumble about 'the youth these days'! Believe in yourself more! Don't you feel frustrated by this!?"

"I *am* frustrated! But how can I believe in myself when I don't even know who I am!?"

"Even if you say that, clinging to me won't help!"

"But isn't there a proverb that says, 'A drowning man will clutch at a straw'!?"

"There is no such pessimistic proverb!"

She was likely anxious because her memories were gone, which was a hassle, but I didn't think I—a complete stranger—could be of much help. I thought for a moment.

"So, you at least want to know who you are?"

As she nodded, I placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Your name is—The Dark Emperor Gigazolas."

"Liar!!"

She screamed, brushing my hand off her shoulder. I met her scream with a cold stare.

"Oh? You don't even remember who you are, right? Then you can't say for sure that you're *not* Giga-whatever, can you?"

"I certainly don't remember my name, but it's obvious you just made up that 'Giga' name on the spot! Besides, no parent would give their child a name that sounds like it’s going to destroy the world!"

"So, you're confident your name isn't Giga?"

"I am!"

I gave her a gentle smile.

"If you have that much confidence, you'll be fine. You can definitely make it on your own. Good luck!"

"No, I'm not letting you trick me with that smile!"

She clung to me even harder.

Good grief... this is a pain...

I gave a heavy sigh. I guess there was no helping it.

"Look... clinging to me isn't going to bring your memory back. So, how about this? There's a town called Simia ahead, so we'll go there together for now and have a doctor look at you. I'll stay with you until then."

".....I understand....."

She nodded, though she still looked a bit dissatisfied. And so, the two of us decided to travel together to the nearby town.

However, not knowing her name made even conversation difficult.

"Well then, let's decide on a temporary name for now—"

"No, wait! If I leave it to you, you'll just give me another ridiculous name, so I'll think of it myself! Let's see... something that means 'beautiful as a flower'..."

"Wow, you have no shame."

She ignored my jab and muttered to herself.

"Flower-hoo..."

"Frankfurt Sausage?"

"That's not a flower! F... Françoise! That's it! Please call me Françoise!"

"Wait, why do you look unhappy!?"

"Well... if the person themselves says it's okay, I guess it's fine... Oh, I forgot to mention, I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. So... Fra... Françoise?"

"I feel like there's a catch... but what is it?"

"Do you at least remember *anything*? Or do you have anything unique among your possessions?"

At my suggestion, she slowed her pace and started patting down her clothes.

"I don't particularly remember anything... but as for possessions..."

She pulled a knife out of her left sleeve. It was slightly shorter than a dining knife. A very common utility knife.

"Doesn't look very unique."

As I said that, she pulled another identical knife out of her sleeve... then another. Then more from her right sleeve. Another, and another. From her upper arms, her thighs, her legs. And one more from her waist and her back.

In the end, the number of knives she produced easily exceeded twenty. She stared at them gloomily.

".....It doesn't look like they'll be much of a clue..."

"No, that's a massive clue! Most people don't walk around with that many knives!"

I really didn't want to get involved with this.

Françoise (Tentative name) blinked in surprise at my observation. She peered into the contents of the pouch and muttered.

"A knife shop?"

"It looks like it's mostly silver and copper coins... but for now, it should be enough for medical bills and living expenses for a while."

".....I guess so....."

I wanted to snap back with a "How can that be!?" but the world is full of nonsensical things like that. I gave a vague nod of agreement. A request for a reward nearly escaped my throat, but I pushed it back down into my chest.

I had told her to see a doctor, but honestly, I didn't think it would bring her memories back. To be blunt, the possibility that she was involved in some kind of shady business had grown quite high, though I didn't say it out loud. Looking at her again, I noticed there were few openings in her posture. She clearly wasn't a complete amateur when it came to martial arts—though, of course, it was possible she had simply learned self-defense.

She tucked the knives back into their original places. From what I'd read in books, amnesia has all sorts of causes—physical, mental, or magical. Consequently, no

definitive cure has ever been found. If I demanded a reward now, and she countered by saying she'd pay if I helped her recover her memories, I'd be in a bind. Depending on the situation, that contract could end up being for an indefinite period.

"Aside from that, there's just this," she said, pulling out a leather pouch.

Unaware of my internal calculations, she returned the leather pouch—which was stuffed so full of coins it practically overflowed from her palm—to her pocket. Since it was stuffed that much, it was obviously a wallet.

"Since I have money, it doesn't seem like I was attacked by robbers."

"I suppose so."

"It looks like there's a fair amount in there," I agreed.

There used to be a fairly large bandit gang in this area, but I had decimated them. It wasn't out of malice. I just couldn't sleep well, so I went for a night walk. I found them throwing a defenseless, rowdy party in the mountains not far from the town I was staying in, and... well.

The possibility that she was a member and lost her memory from the shock of my attack crossed my mind for a second, but that was unlikely. If she had taken one of my attacks, she'd be charred to a crisp. So, the bandit theory was out.

I caught a whiff of something. The scent of herbs tickled my nose.

"......Maybe."
I cut myself off, approached her, and took a sniff.

"Normally, if you were found collapsed on the highway, you would have passed through one of the towns or villages before or after this spot. But your clothes don't smell like sweat, and I smell herbs. That means you likely have a house or took a room in a town or village... anyway, you settled in somewhere and tidied yourself up. If that's the case, if we ask around at either place, there should be people who saw you or know you."

Françoise's eyes rounded at my remark.

"Now that you mention it, that makes sense! Lina, you're pretty amazing for figuring that out!"

"Oh, it's nothing. Anyone could figure it out with a little thought."

"I suppose you're right."

Ugh, this girl! Just as I was being uncharacteristically humble! I felt a twinge of irritation, but I kept a smile on my face.

"Well, once we get to town... we'll look for a doctor and a cheap inn, since this might be a long haul. I'll stay with you until then—"

I came to a halt. Françoise (Tentative) stopped as well. To the right of the highway, a series of undulating hills rolled away; to the left was a dark forest. From the depths of that forest, a quiet wave of hostility pushed toward us.

There were multiple presences. And they were clearly different from humans.

"Would you hand over the woman—?"

The man's voice echoed just then. I looked—deep in the forest, a figure stood shrouded by the trees. I kept my distance from the forest, moving toward the cedar groves. This season, the deciduous shrubs had dropped their leaves. Between the bare trunks and the sparse underbrush, nearly ten shadows were weaving their way toward us. From their shapes, they looked like wild dogs or wolves.

I began chanting a spell under my breath.

".....I was talking to the sorceress over there. That woman in blue you're with, hand her over."

Françoise rushed over and clung to me. I had no intention of doing what I was told just because he asked.

"Levitation!"

I released the spell I had been chanting. True to its name, it's a spell for floating in the air. Movement is slow, but it's easy to control. Holding Françoise, I drifted up into the sky.

I could tell he was a man by his voice, but because he wore a hood and a cloak, I couldn't see his face at all. Beside him was a large beast—either a dog or a wolf. Since it followed orders, I assumed it was a dog.

Françoise turned pale at the man's demand. "What do you plan to do with Lina!?"

"——Planning to run!?" the man's voice chased after us. Because we were in the air, I could no longer see him through the trees.

"I just didn't want you setting your dogs on us while we're talking, so I decided to float for a bit. That's all," I shouted down.

The man was silent for a moment, and then a note of sudden panic crept into his voice.

"You're... not actually...! You're planning to keep *that* all for yourself...!"

That?

I glanced at Fran, but she just furrowed her brow. "What are you talking about!?" she called out to the unseen man. "Do you know me!?"

"Don't play dumb! If you're going to lie, at least come up with a better one! Fine! If that's how it's going to be, I'll take you back no matter what it takes! Wash your neck and wait for me!"

With that parting threat, the presence of the man and his beasts receded.

"Wait! I really don't remember anything! If you know something, tell me!"

Françoise's voice failed to reach him, or perhaps he simply ignored her. The presence of the man and the dogs vanished completely from the area.

".....What... exactly am I.....?" Françoise muttered.

We were in the town of Simia, further down the highway. At the dining hall on the first floor of our inn, she sat without even touching the drink that had been served.

As soon as we arrived, the first thing we did was find a doctor to examine her. It turned out she had likely lost her memory due to a blow to the head. Under the bandana wrapped around her forehead was a mark from where she had hit something—or been hit.

The cause was clear, but the result was exactly as I expected: "There's nothing to be done. Her memory might return tomorrow, or it might not return for ten years."

I took her, dejected as she was, to find a cheap inn.

"That man said 'that'..... but I really have no idea what he meant."

"That's only natural since you have no memory," I agreed, sipping some grape juice. I knew this was coming.

"It sounded like I have something that he wants. But... I don't have anything special like that."

I started counting off the possibilities on my fingers.

"There are a few possibilities. One:you remember information necessary to get 'that.' Two: before you lost your memory, you hid 'that' somewhere. Three: the man simply has you confused with someone else."

I didn't mention the fourth possibility I had thought of.

"In any case, we have too few clues at this stage. That man seemed to know something, but he wasn't exactly in the mood for a chat. For now, we'll stick to the original plan and ask around in this town and Lotus Village to see if anyone recognizes you."

".....Um....."

She was silent for a moment—then she pulled out the bag of gold from her pocket. She poured the contents onto the table with a clatter and divided it into two piles.

"Lina..... no, Miss Lina! I have a request."

Françoise, walking beside me, kept her head bowed in silence.

As I expected, the questioning was going poorly. Simia wasn't a big town, but it wasn't so small that a quick inquiry would turn up everything. We hit up the places where people gather—inns, eateries, the market—but in the end, we had no luck. Of course, we only started asking after we'd settled things at our own inn. The sun had already begun to set.

"Would you lend me your strength for ten days... no, five days, so I can find out who I am? I won't say it's for free. There's that man to consider, too. Things might get dangerous. I know this might not be enough when I think about that, but... please!"

She was right. One pile of those coins was more than enough for five days' worth of lodging and food, but as hazard pay, it was quite lacking. Still, I was already involved to some extent. And there were things that piqued my curiosity.

I gave a small sigh and pulled one of the piles toward me.

".....Only five days."

"Thank you so much!" she said, bowing deeply.

The night was dark, the light from the thin moon was weak, and our footsteps were heavy as we walked. Many shops were already closing up for the day. It was true that we hadn't been moving very efficiently. After wandering around and asking questions, we'd grabbed dinner, and by the time the regular eateries started closing, we began hitting the taverns. Now, deep into the night, we decided to call it a day and were on our way back to the inn.

".....Well, the real questioning starts tomorrow," I said, trying to keep my tone bright. "Or maybe we could head out to Lotus Village and get the questioning done there first. It’s a tiny village where everyone knows each other, so it should be over quickly. It’ll be a loss in travel time, but if you came from that direction, it’s only natural we wouldn't find anything no matter how much we ask around here."

"You're right....." Françoise looked up and forced a smile at my suggestion.

It seemed like this was going to be a long process if we just did things normally. At this hour, the only things that could be called lights in the town were the scattered streetlamps and the lamps outside the taverns that were still open. The orange glows flickering here and there served more to emphasize the depth of the night than to actually provide illumination.

In the midst of that night...

"Found you."

The man's voice and presence stirred in the darkness. Almost simultaneously, several black masses emerged—the dogs the man had with him. They crept closer, their low

growls vibrating through the night air. I tried to spot the man, but it was impossible to catch his form in the shadows.

"Wait a second! It's true she's lost her memory!" I shouted into the dark, but the only response was a sneer.

"---Get them. Oh, I’m sure she has. But if she loses two or three limbs, I’m sure she’ll remember all sorts of things."

Well, I figured he wouldn't believe us. But honestly, this was convenient in its own way. Asking this man was clearly the fastest way to find out about Fran.

"Your friend seems to be a practitioner of the arts," the man's voice rang out with an air of confidence. "But don't think that alone will win the day."

True, I couldn't use any flashy offensive spells inside the town. In this darkness, the dogs had the advantage, and I couldn't pinpoint the man's location. Even if we ran, I didn't know if we could shake the dogs. He'd thought this through quite well. The situation was overwhelmingly in his favor. It would be difficult to break through this...

...if I were just an average sorceress, that is.

I began chanting a spell under my breath.

"Go!" the man commanded. One of the dogs let out a howl, and at that signal, the shadows came racing toward us!

But! The spell I was chanting was *Van Reil*, a cold-based spell! If I touched the ground and activated it, vines of frost would crawl out from that point, turning everything they touched into ice statues! Every single one of those charging dogs—and maybe even Françoise standing right next to me—would be frozen, but I'd just thaw her out later, so she'd have to forgive me!

I finished the chant, but before my raised hand could touch the earth...

"Yipe!"

A dog's yelp echoed through the night. "Awoo-yip!" Then two more followed. And then...

"What!?" came the man's shocked voice.

I looked over to see Françoise standing beside me. In her hands, several glints of light sparkled under the faint moon. She had thrown her knives at the dogs as they rushed through the darkness. It was not something a mere amateur could do so easily. I couldn't tell how much damage she'd actually dealt, but it certainly made them wary enough to stop their advance.

I felt a presence of hesitation from across the darkness. And then...

"......Retreat."

The man issued the order to pull back quite easily. One of the dogs barkled again, and the presence of the beasts faded away.

Wait, hold on! If I don't deal with you, I can't find out anything about Françoise!

I wanted to give chase, but chasing a man with dogs in this darkness was reckless even for me. If they counterattacked, it would hurt, and even if I tried to follow from the air, I'd likely lose them instantly in this gloom.

"I guess they're gone....."

The presence of the man and the dogs vanished, leaving me and her alone in the dark.

"Yeah."I nodded vaguely. I had been caught in that space between sleep and waking when I heard a sound in the darkness.

But... something was definitely off. Despite talking big about how he wasn't afraid of sorcerers, he had retreated the moment some knives were thrown at his dogs.

Françoise stood there with a sunken expression. Because of the training my sister put me through back home, I've become the type to wake up at the slightest hint of bloodlust or hostility directed my way, even in my sleep. But this time, it was something else.

I hesitated for a moment, then finally headed to Françoise's room next door.

"But... what if I find out who I am... and it turns out I'm a terrible person?"

The door was open.

A room in the dark, with only the hallway light spilling in—and in that light, Françoise stood dazed in her nightgown.

"You'll be fine," I said. Even in my half-asleep state, I was certain I had heard a sound. A hard thud, like something hitting a surface.

I gave her shoulder a light, reassuring tap. "Are you okay?"

"In that case, I'll just keep blasting you with offensive spells until you regret being a villain from the bottom of your soul."

"Miss Lina!"

She muttered, still looking shell-shocked. "Who... am I really? When those dogs attacked, my body just moved on its own."

"But..."

Françoise relaxed her shoulders and looked down at the knives in her hand. "But I don't think a normal knife-shop owner could do something like that."

"Well, yeah. You clearly have some skill, which is a big clue."

"I... I'd prefer a different kind of clue, though."

I offered some "spiritual care"—which, of course, assumed she wasn't actually a villain. As I talked, the voice of Françoise, who had been on the verge of tears, finally pulled my consciousness back from the edge of sleep.

I had jumped out of bed and grabbed my short sword which I'd leaned against the wall. I'd expected a night attack, so I was still in my clothes—minus the cloak, of course.

"I don't know... I heard a knock and thought it was you, Miss Lina... but when I called out, they ran away."

"Was it the guy with the dogs?"

"I don't know his face, and he didn't say a word before fleeing."

Still, I didn't think it was a coincidence. A drunk who just had the wrong room wouldn't need to dash away like that. But if it was an assassination attempt, knocking on the front door was bizarre. Just what was going on around her?

As if mocking my confusion, the howl of a dog echoed through the night from somewhere outside the inn.

Lost Memory [Part 2]

The leaves of the trees shook from the force of the explosion.

"Did I get him!?"

Walking toward the center of the blast while spitting out classic villain lines was none other than me, Lina Inverse.

".....U-Um....."

I ignored the bewildered muttering of Françoise (self-proclaimed) and marched into the forest. However, my expectations were betrayed. Lying there, charred and defeated, were just a few common bandits.

What a massive pain this case was turning out to be.

An amnesiac woman named Françoise (Tentative). A man with dogs targeting her. The only thing clear was that these two people existed. The overall picture of the incident was still completely invisible.

The main cause was the dog-user's attitude. Usually, villains are "user-friendly"; they flap their cloaks around for no reason, announce their names, and ramble on about their noble ideals or terrifying goals without being asked.

But this dog-user? Whether he just had a good sense of when to quit or simply lacked backbone, he would show his face for a split second and then vanish.

My plan had been to blow him away and end this in one go. While traveling the highway, I had sensed several hostile presences in the woods. Thinking it had to be the man and his dogs, I attacked without even confirming their identity—only to find out they were just passing bandits. Obviously, that didn't give us any clues.

I figured the fastest way to solve this was to blast the guy and make him talk. Because of his hit-and-run tactics, I didn't even know his name. But it was a fact he knew Françoise.

To find out the truth, I decided to leave town with her and head for Lotus Village. It was a small village she might have passed through. My goal was twofold: ask around about her identity, and more importantly, lure the dog-user out. On a lonely highway, he'd likely attack. Then I'd counter-attack and catch him.

The "fish" I caught earlier was a dud, but the plan itself seemed to be working. After I trashed the bandits and we resumed our walk, I started feeling someone's eyes on us. It wasn't my imagination. Probably the dog-user.

However, he wasn't close enough for me to pinpoint him. I pretended not to notice and tried to bait him into moving. I didn't say anything to Françoise and intentionally showed a few openings while acting nonchalant.

But in the end...

".....We've arrived..... at the village."

".....Yeah....."

No attack came. We reached the entrance of Lotus Village without further incident. He was being cautious—typical of him, I suppose.

If that's how it was, I'd just have to do some standard questioning. It was a tiny village. The houses were scattered among fields carved out of the forest; there were fewer than thirty in total. Even if I visited every single one, it wouldn't take long.

"I'm pretty sure there's only one inn here."

I spoke to Françoise as we walked toward it.

"In a village this small?"

"I didn't go in when I passed through yesterday, but I saw a sign."

As I spoke, it came into view. It looked like just a slightly larger house. A piece of wood was nailed to the door with "Inn: Bed, Booze, & Food" scrawled on it in amateur handwriting. They probably just used their spare rooms as a side business.

The sweet scent of stew wafted past my nose as I approached. Come to think of it, it was about lunchtime. I figured we could grab a meal while we asked around. I pushed open the poorly fitted door to find a cramped interior.

A crude counter, small tables, and tiny chairs were crammed onto the dirt floor. But what surprised me was that there were actually customers.

Three men were sitting at the counter near the entrance, drinking even though it was the middle of the day. They glared at us—and then, suddenly gasping, they scrambled to their feet and tried to bolt for the back!

"As if I'd let you!"

I dashed after them!

"Wait, customers!?"

"Miss Lina!"

I ignored the scream of the proprietress and Françoise's voice, weaving between tables and chairs.

"Freeze Arrow!"

The ice arrows struck the back door just as they reached it. I cut through the kitchen and burst out the back door—at the same time, I let loose another spell I'd been chanting!

I bound their limbs to the earth.

"Waaaaah!"

"Hieee!"

"H-Help!"

The men screamed, looking at me with terrified eyes. I looked down at them haughtily from the back door of the inn.

"Why are you running?"

Their faces contorted even further. "N-No reason!" "We didn't do anything!" "It's true, believe us!"

They were busy spitting out excuses when Françoise caught up.

"Miss Lina!"

Françoise, arriving late, looked between me and the men. "..............Who are these people?"

I hesitated for a split second on how to answer, but in the end, I just tilted my head and said honestly, "No idea."

"WHAAAAAAAAAT!?"

Françoise and the men shouted in unison.

"Then why did you chase them down and attack them!?"

"Well, they ran. It just kind of happened."

"What do you mean 'it just happened'!?"

Facing Françoise's accusatory glare, I flashed a deceptive smile. "Look, call it a maiden's hunting instinct. I'm just at that age where I attack by spinal reflex."

"The only thing that has a 'bloody age' like that is a cat!"

Overhearing our conversation, one of the men interjected. "W-wait a minute! You... you don't remember us!?"

"Have we met somewhere?" I asked back.

"Uh... well....." His eyes darted around as he stammered.

I took another look at them. I didn't recognize their faces, but judging by their poorly maintained clothes, their questionable hairstyles, and the look in their eyes, I could take a pretty good guess at their background.

Aha... so they do remember me.

"By any chance, are you the bandits from a while ago?"

I threw out a guess to bait them, and it looked like I hit the bullseye. Granted, I had no idea when "a while ago" actually was. I'm not bragging, but I, Lina Inverse, beat down bandits all over the place on a regular basis. I'd just trashed some on the way to this village, and I'd decimated a large gang a couple of nights ago. If you go back further, the list is endless. There's no way I'd remember every single one of their faces.

To be honest, when they first bolted, I was hoping they were connected to the dog-user incident, but it looks like that was a miss. Their voices didn't match the dog-user's, either.

Well, a miss is a miss. I decided to give them a firm warning.

"So? Gathering in a place like this and running the moment I show up... were you plotting something wicked again?"

The color drained from their faces. I'd clearly hit the mark, but they frantically shook their heads.

"N-no, no, no! We were just discussing how we're tired of getting attacked by monsters like you and that we should look for honest jobs or something!"

They were desperately making up excuses when a sound echoed through the air—a dog's howl! And not just one. Then another, and another, echoing like a chorus.

It was close!

"Miss Lina.....?" Françoise looked shaken.

I gave her a fearless grin. "Looks like the dog-user finally showed up. This time, I'm ending this."

"---Does that mean---"

"Exactly. If we beat him, we'll definitely get a lead on your memories."

She nodded silently at my words.

At the edge of the village stood a grove of trees withered by winter. A shadow stood among the trees—the same hooded and cloaked figure from before. Under the midday sun, I could just barely make out his features. He was a man, likely in his mid-twenties. His face wasn't quite haggard, but his jaw was lean and his gaze sharp. His black hair hung over his brow. His cloak was closed, so I couldn't tell if he had armor or weapons.

Beside him stood more than ten shadows. Dogs—well, I called them dogs, but they looked more like wolves. Maybe a mixed breed. Their eyes and builds weren't those of pets; their fangs were bared, ready to tear human flesh.

"So you came back. Why keep running away?" I called out as I walked slowly toward them.

"Don't be arrogant," the man replied. "I was merely waiting for the right opportunity."

"Oh, I know your type. Always 'waiting for the right opportunity' while you let your whole life pass you by. Usually, that’s just code for being all talk and no action."

".....Are you trying to provoke me?"

"Nope. Just stating facts."

I kept moving forward, raising my voice. "And for the record, it’s true that she’s lost her memory."

The man didn't let his expression waver. "Still sticking to that story? Fine. I don't intend to play along with you two much longer. Let's settle this here."

That was fine by me. I slowly reached for the short sword at my waist with my left hand.

"Get them!"

At his command, the dogs kicked off the ground all at once! The dog-user himself also began to close the distance with long strides!

"Climb a tree!" I shouted to Françoise, sprinting toward a nearby tree myself.

The dogs were closing in. While chanting a spell, I unfastened the short sword—scabbard and all—with my left hand. I jammed the tip into the base of the tree and used the sword as a foothold to haul myself halfway up the trunk. Considering the speed of the dogs, I’d stopped at the edge of the grove to keep some distance.

I used that momentum to scramble even higher. I could sense Fran stopping behind me. Below, the barking of the dogs exploded into a chorus of heavy breathing. I managed to climb just out of reach of their jumping distance.

Once I climbed a bit higher, I unleashed the spell I’d been chanting.

"Flare Arrow!"

But just a split second faster, the man's voice rang out: "What!?"

Several streaks of fire from the man's own *Flare Arrow* came screaming straight toward me! If I stayed like this, I'd take a direct hit! And I had nowhere to run!

In that case!

I let go of the trunk with my right hand, flared my cloak, and released my own power!

"Freeze Arrow!"

The ten or so arrows of cold I released crossed paths with his fire arrows, heading straight for the dog-user! One of his fire arrows slammed into my outstretched cloak and dissipated! The others all missed—barely!

Of course, a normal cloak can't deflect a fire arrow. It would have punched through and charred me. But I had intentionally hit my own cloak with two of my ice arrows, freezing it instantly to create a makeshift ice shield.

The dog-user scrambled to the side to dodge my remaining arrows, but he wasn't fast enough. The edge of his cloak was pinned to the ground by the cold. Two of the three dogs he kept by his side were also frozen solid!

"Guh! Damn it!"

He stumbled, frantically tugging at his cloak, but it wouldn't come free that easily.

I started my next chant, stripped off the heavy, frozen cloak along with my right glove that was stuck to it, and threw them down.

"Heads up!"

A dog's yelp echoed below. It sounded like it hit one of them.

"Crap! Give me some cover!"

I checked the position of the dogs below—they were swarming toward me, naturally.

I jumped right into the middle of them!

"Van Reil!"

The moment I hit the ground, I touched the earth and released the spell! The vines of cold spiraled out from my hand, turning every dog they touched into an ice statue!

I stood up and scanned the area. All the dogs that had been coming for me were now frozen. But there were still some left. One remained by the dog-user, and three were under the tree Françoise had climbed.

If the man had ordered those remaining dogs to attack me now, it might have been tricky, but the guy was too busy frantically pulling at his cloak. He was panicking so hard he couldn't even think to just unbuckle the cloak and leave it.

The dog-user turned bloodshot eyes toward Françoise. "What are you doing!? Stop pretending to have amnesia!"

...Eh?

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?" My voice of shock echoed through the trees.

I looked up. Françoise was still clinging to the tree trunk, her mouth hanging open. She pointed to herself with her free hand. "Me...?"

The man's movements froze as he continued to tug. "Wh-what are you saying? Lavinia!"

"Lavinia?"

"L-then... am I actually... with this dog-user person!?"

"Whaaaaaaaaat!?"

Both their voices echoed. Fran—no, Lavinia—muttered in anxiety. I nodded as all the threads in my mind suddenly snapped into one.

".....I see. So that's how it is!"

I stopped my next spell. My voice drew both their gazes. First, I pointed at the man.

"Your target wasn't 'her' from the start. Your real target was me: Lina Inverse."

Even from a distance, I could see his mouth twist under his hood.

"Whether you wanted to make a name for yourself by defeating me, or someone with a grudge hired you, I don't know. But you decided it wasn't wise to face me head-on, so you two cooked up a plan."

"A plan...?"

"Right. You pretend to have amnesia to get close to me. Then the guy pretends to be hunting you, but in reality, he's hunting me. If you had a clear opening, you would have taken me out from behind. That was the plan. However, an unexpected variable occurred. To make the lie more convincing, you had him hit you on the head—"

".....No way.....?"

At the man's trembling voice, I gave a small nod. "She actually lost her memory for real!"

A cold wind whistled through the trees.

The two of them started shouting at the same time, then looked at each other and fell silent. That reaction alone was all the proof I needed that my theory was right.

Thinking back, the dog-user had been way too quick to retreat. It wasn't because he lacked spine.

"Last night, when you brought the dogs and 'Françoise'—I mean Lavinia—attacked them with knives..." I said to the dog-user. "You believed she was your accomplice, so you took that as a signal and retreated."

".....Impossible..." the man muttered, aghast.

"And when you visited her room in the middle of the night, it wasn't to attack her; it was to coordinate your next move. When she screamed, you interpreted that as another signal that now wasn't the time, and you ran. But in reality, she really had no idea who you were and was just reacting normally."

Lavinia (formerly Françoise) slid down from the tree and looked back and forth between me and the man. "So... then... I'm really his partner? I was... trying to kill you, Miss Lina?"

"Do you really... do you really remember nothing, Lavinia!?" the dog-user called out in a pained voice. "Not even me... not even your Deeke!?"

She silently shook her head. Deeke’s shoulders slumped heavily. "How can this be..."

"How... how could something so stupid happen... she really lost her memory... Is it... is it my fault...!? If I hadn't suggested hitting her to make the mark look real for the lie... Or if I’d just used a piece of firewood instead of a log... Come to think of it, when I hit her, she flew all the way to the other side of the road... Maybe I put too much strength into it...!"

You definitely put too much into it. Honestly, it's a miracle she's even alive.

".....But, what should I do now....."

Lavinia muttered, turning a pleading gaze toward me. Of course, I only had one answer.

"How should I know!?"

"So cold!"

"I mean, why should I help you when I know you were trying to kill me!?"

"If her memory returns and she tries to take my life again, I won't be able to stand it," I complained.

"I’m sorry... but I cannot do that," Deeke said, slowly raising his head. "Lavinia’s situation was... a surprise... but even so, we’ve already received an advance from those people. I can't just say I'm quitting and be done with it."

"Isn't it fine to just give up on one little life! It's not like it's a limited resource!" Lavinia chimed in.

"It *is* a limited resource, obviously! My lifespan, my nerves, and my effort!" I snapped back.

"This ends when... Lina Inverse, when I defeat you... or when we are defeated."

He seemed to have finally regained his composure. He cast aside his cloak, revealing leather armor and two short swords at his waist.

"Um... excuse me, but what’s going to happen to me...?" Lavinia approached me, looking uneasy. "It sounds like someone hired them, or something like that..."

I had no intention of being a target. While he was saying "I cannot do that," I had been chanting a spell under my breath. If she ignored the job, the people who hired her would come after her; and of course, even if she told them she'd really lost her memory, they wouldn't believe her.

He drew both short swords with a sharp metallic slide.

"Here I come! Li—"

"Dug Radig!"

Countless lightning strikes, connecting heaven and earth, answered my "Word of Power," striking down the man and his remaining dogs with effortless ease. It was a wide-range spell, but I kept the lethality low. He wouldn't be able to move for a while, but his life wasn't in danger.

"Can't you do something about this!?" Lavinia cried.

"Don't ask for the impossible! Besides, Fra... I mean, Lavinia, do you really want to go back to being a person who targets someone's life just for money or a name once your memory returns?"

At my pointed question, she winced slightly. "Th-that... I'd hate that, but..."

"Right? So, let's just take this chance to aim for being a decent person."

Despite my persuasion, she still looked dissatisfied. "But, staying without my memories is also..."

I gave a heavy sigh. "Anyway, regardless of your memories, you have to give up on taking my life."

"Despise us for being mercenaries if you must. But this is the way we live. I'll have to think about Lavinia later... but for now, I'll settle things with you!"

Of course, I had a plan for that too. This is how I handled it.

Boom.

A cloud of earth and sand erupted, swallowing Lavinia's strange scream as she was sent flying high into the air.

"Dill Brand."

".....So... that's... how it is....."

The groaned words came from Deeke. He was lying flat on the ground, yet he managed to turn his face toward me. Oh? He could still speak? That’s quite impressive.

I gave a small shrug. "It’s nothing complicated. I simply fought back against someone who targeted my life. That’s all."

I flashed a small smile at him. "With this, you—who turned out to be useless—are off the hook. They might tell you to return the advance, but I doubt they’ll seek revenge."

".....Thanks to that, it seems... we won't have to worry about the bandits anymore either....."

Before the thought in my mind could reach my lips, Lavinia groaned and sat up. She shook her head lightly, and as soon as she saw me, her eyes widened in shock. With an obvious look of agitation, she suddenly shouted:

"W-where is this? Who am I?"

It was—the most perfect, wooden delivery I’d ever heard.

When I’d taken her to the doctor, I’d been told that when a person's memory returns, they sometimes forget the time when they *didn't* have their memory.

While Deeke and I stood frozen, Lavinia stared at me and said, "Could it be that you’re the one who rescued me—?"

[.....]

Deeke groaned in a tired voice. It seemed that my previous attack spell had actually caused her memory to return.

"...rescued me—?"

However, she had completely forgotten everything that happened while she was an amnesiac.

"Um, Lavinia?"

From her perspective, the plan to assassinate Lina Inverse had only just begun. At Deeke's call, she turned her gaze toward him—and there, of course, were the fallen Deeke and the dogs.

"Ah!! Deeke!!" She screamed and wobbled to her feet, staggering over to him. "What on earth happened!?"

".....No. I'm the one who wants to ask that..." he muttered, turning his gaze toward me for an explanation.

Why are you asking *me*?

"That's how it is," I said.

And so, she had started her performance of "amnesia" all over again.

"Eh? What? What does that mean?"

Facing Lavinia, who was flustered beside Deeke without understanding the situation, I gave a heavy sigh. "To put it simply: the plan is over."

Deeke explained it to the confused girl. I looked at the two of them. Well, I could pretty much guess what happened next.

"Setting that aside... those bandits who asked you to kill me... were they by any chance a gang based around here?"

Deeke seemed to have resigned himself. He answered with a serious expression. "Yeah. You might have heard the name. A group of about a hundred bandits called the 'Bloody Axes'—"

Just as I thought. "Oh. I crushed them."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Like I said. I crushed them a couple of nights ago."

The two of them were rendered speechless by my casual remark. I continued regardless.

"They were having a defenseless party in the mountains a little way from town. I happened to drop five or six of my flashier attack spells on them."

"....."

"I'm sure they hired you to take me out before I got to them, but since I already wiped them out first... it's a total joke."

Now it was clear. There were two reasons why Deeke had been so desperate to finish the fight today.

One was that Lavinia and I had been "attacked" by bandits on the way to this village. Whether you could call it an attack or not is one thing... but he was likely worried that someone else would steal his "prey."

The other was that I had run into the remnants of those bandits at the village inn. Deeke, watching from somewhere, panicked. If those bandits recognized Lavinia's face or accidentally said something, the plan would be exposed. He must have thought it was better to force a confrontation right then and there.

In reality, the moment Lavinia *actually* lost her memory, the plan had been a fundamental failure.

".....So that means....."

Deeke looked aghast at my explanation. ".....What Lavinia and I were doing was..."

"Yep. Meaningless."

"If the client gang is gone, you won't get paid even if you defeat me."

As I stated it flatly, he faceplanted into the dirt again. Beside him, Lavinia still looked bewildered, but she seemed to understand that the "Assassinate Lina Inverse" plan had failed.

Normally, I would have confiscated all their money as a penalty for targeting my life, but I didn't this time. The reason was simple: if I lingered, I had a feeling the two of them would start the "Who am I? Where is this?" routine again.

"What's this?" Deeke asked, finally able to move his body as he slowly sat up.

"That's that. By the way, I just have one thing to ask you."

The roar of attack spells echoed through the winter sky. Many, many times.

And so, the incident finally came to an end.

(Lost Memory: The End)

Stamp to Kill [Part 1]

The guard at the checkpoint flashed a wide grin as he pressed a stamp onto my upper arm.

When was it that I'd overheard that this town had a shop serving an incredibly delicious pot-steamed veal? I had stopped by for that very reason, and as I approached the town from the highway, I found a single soldier conducting inspections, clad in armor and a helmet decorated with a magnificent plume.

The inspection itself was a simple affair; he asked my name and the purpose of my travel, then stamped a circle with two horizontal bars onto my bare left upper arm as proof of clearance.

"Um..."

I tried to speak to him as I prepared to enter the town, but he either didn't notice or ignored my call.

"Captain, what on earth are you doing?!"
"What kind of nonsense are you up to?!"

A soldier came running toward us, his face pale. He wore a helmet and armor with a sword at his waist, looking to be in his mid-twenties. That was all well and good, but his helmet was the type that protected only the top of the head down to the ears—quite different from the captain's grand helmet that covered the cheeks.

"You're late, Rykar-kun!"

The checkpoint soldier—the man called Captain—let out an arrogant, boisterous laugh.

"It was your own blunder to defenselessly drink the sake I brought last night! I have already completed more than twenty 'Inspections'!"

"Captain, I'm sorry, but the thing I can't 'handle' most right now is your sheer incompetence!" Rykar shouted.

"Whoa, did you just call me incompetent? I am technically your superior!!"

Zudon.

I fired a small offensive spell off to the side.

"Can I ask a question?"

When I spoke, the two of them immediately sat in *seiza* (formal kneeling) before me, looking as if they would answer anything I asked.

"So... what is this exactly?" I pointed to the mark on my arm.

"Well... where should I start..." the Captain began.

Rykar immediately snapped from the side, "There's no reason to be so conflicted about where to start! In the first place, you—"

"Silence! Be quiet, Rykar-kun! Sometimes the order in which a story is told determines whether things settle peacefully or if unnecessary strife breaks out!"

"That's not a matter of storytelling—"

"Ahem."

The moment I let out a small sigh, the two of them shut their mouths and stared at me while remaining in *seiza*.

"I'll be the one asking, so answer briefly. No introductions. No bickering."

The Captain began to sweat.

"I'll answer immediately!" "Good. Now, what is this mark?"

I pointed to the mark the Captain had stamped on my arm. He averted his eyes, looking awkward.

"Well... it's not really a big deal, nothing to worry about... it's just..."

"Speak."

At my sharp command, the Captain straightened his back.

"It's the murder notification mark used by an assassin."

Fireball.

This time, I aimed the direct hit at the Captain.

"There's an assassin who appeared around here recently," Rykar explained to me while we both watched the charred Captain.

I watched the passersby out of the corner of my eye. It wasn't exactly a topic for a pleasant day under the clear sun, but I couldn't take my eyes off the charred Captain either. There was no telling when he'd revive and start doing something strange again.

"An assassin?" I asked.

"Yeah. A real eccentric. He puts this mark on his target, waits about five days, kills them, and then draws pupils into the mark."

"Pupils?"

"He adds half-black circles between the two lines like this. When that happens, it looks like a sleepy person's eyes, so the assassin got the nickname 'Sleepy Eye'."

I see. In that case—

"Almost everyone in the guard, including me, has been stamped with this. He's been going around stamping townspeople and travelers too. As soon as the Captain realized what was happening, he panicked and went to the Mage Guild to procure ink that doesn't wash off, and he's been running around stamping everyone he sees."

"That doesn't really help your case," I noted.

"No, I'm not trying to defend him," Rykar sighed.

He pointed to his own cheek. "He's doing this because he thinks if everyone has the mark, the assassin won't be able to tell who the real target is... but..."

Even though I'd already thought the Captain's treatment was pretty dismissive for a subordinate-superior relationship, I could now see why.

"Well, I guess it's fine," I muttered.

Rykar and I both looked at the charred, collapsed Captain at the same time. Of course, as he had just said, just because someone else put the same mark on people, there was no way a professional assassin would mistake their target. But it certainly didn't make the person who got stamped feel any better. And while it wasn't permanent, the ink wouldn't come off with just a bit of water.

"Four days ago, the Captain woke up with the mark on his cheek. Since he's the Captain of the Guard, he's a man in a position of responsibility, so it helps that the assassin hasn't attacked yet."

"He's just a man who's a bit of an airhead and can't see what's around him," I said as I stood up to leave. "Good luck."

As I turned to go, Rykar's eyes went wide. "Eh? You're just going to let it go? After what the Captain did?"

"Getting a weird stamp is annoying, but I already blew him up once with a spell. I'm satisfied."

"...For my part, I would have preferred if you'd let your anger go and turned the Captain into cinders so there'd be no loose ends."

"I'll leave that part to you."

On my way back to the inn after dinner, I felt a wonderful sense of fullness. Even the slightly chilly night wind felt pleasant.

Man, that was delicious... The herb-crusted steamed veal was spectacular. It was juicy and perfectly spiced. I'd had several helpings, and by the time I finished, it was already late.

All that was left was to go back to the inn and relax. It was a moment of pure bliss—until the bloodlust suddenly appeared.

The wind hissed. I pulled back instinctively as a shadow flickered across my vision from left to right. My relaxed mood vanished instantly, replaced by the sharp edge of battle.

The town was empty. Under the moonlight and streetlamps, I looked to my right and saw a figure clad entirely in black cloth. From head to toe, they were wrapped in

fabric like a turban. I could barely see a gap where the eyes should be, but it was too dark to see anything inside.

The figure stood with their hands hanging loosely, appearing unarmed. But given the sound of the wind that had just sliced past me, I knew they weren't bare-handed. Hidden weapons, perhaps?

"Who are you?" I asked.

I have plenty of reasons to be targeted by people, so it was possible this was just another one of those. But at that moment, the name "Sleepy Eye" flashed through my mind.

I showed the mark on my arm. "I'm telling you this just in case you've got the wrong person, but this mark was put on me by a weird soldier earlier today."

The figure didn't react. It was less like they were hesitating and more like they were completely ignoring my words. Well, if they weren't going to back down, I'd just have to take them down!

"Freeze Arrow!"

I released a dozen arrows of cold. They carved glittering trails through the darkness, heading straight for the black figure—but the figure didn't even flinch.

I was sure they would hit—but the next moment, the figure vanished into the darkness!

There was no impact. They had dodged. But at that timing, it should have been impossible to evade all the arrows. Where did they go!?

I began my next chant while frantically searching for their presence. A faint trace of hostility was melting into the night air. The darkness seemed to grow even deeper. I sharpened all my senses.

A slight pressure in the air—from my back left!

I rolled in the opposite direction just as the wind whistled over my head. I saw the black figure standing in my peripheral vision.

"Van Reil!"

I touched the ground, sending a spiral of cold racing across the pavement. If it touched them, they'd be trapped in ice! At this range, there was no way to escape!

"Freeze!"

I was certain of victory—but then, the figure stood there calmly, untouched by the ice. They swung their hand toward me in a horizontal sweep.

"Hey! You're always so loud!"

A coarse voice suddenly echoed from an alley, and the figure's movement stopped. Two drunks came stumbling out, bickering and grabbing at each other.

"You're the one who's always acting like the big brother!"

"That's because I *am* the big brother!"

By the time the two of them noticed something was wrong and looked toward us, the black figure was already gone. Even I, standing right there, hadn't seen them disappear. I stood there in the cold night wind, a cold sweat running down my back.

The next morning, I visited the guard station.

"You're joking, right?" Ryker cried out.

"....." I groaned.

Behind him, Captain Petal's eyes were wide with shock. The other guards were looking at me with stunned expressions. I had told them as soon as I walked in: I was attacked by "Sleepy Eye."

No one even offered me a seat. I remained standing as they stared at me.

"It's true. I was attacked by a figure in black last night. They didn't introduce themselves, though."

"That movement... they were quite skilled."

"Yes!" The Captain gave a small fist-pump.

"Don't be happy about it!" the guards yelled.

I pointed to the mark on my arm. "And then there’s this mark that *someone* put on me."

Immediately, a rain of punches, kicks, vases, and chairs descended upon the Captain.

"Do you realize what you’ve done!?" Ryker demanded once the assault had settled.

"It’s obvious! My plan worked, and the probability of *me* being targeted has decreased! Why shouldn't I be proud of that!?"

"STOP BRAGGING!" Another round of blunt-force trauma followed.

As Ryker had told me, every guard was wearing the same mark, courtesy of the Captain. It was no wonder they were furious. If I had been targeted by mistake because of the mark, it meant they were all in danger of the same thing.

Between you and me, I didn't actually think the person last night was "Sleepy Eye." Even if the world is full of idiots, it’s hard to believe a professional assassin would mistake their target’s age and gender just because of a mark. It was more likely someone with a grudge had hired a killer to come after me.

But regardless, I wouldn't be able to sleep soundly until I caught the person. So, I decided to play along and pretend it *was* "Sleepy Eye" to get the guards to help me.

I flashed a smile at the Captain. "Well, it’s a good thing I wasn't killed. If a traveler had been murdered because of your mistake, you wouldn't just be fired... you’d likely end up in prison for being an accomplice to an assassin."

The Captain’s expression twitched, but he forced a smile. "No, no, surely it wouldn't come to that—"

"Of course it would," Ryker cut him off bluntly. "If an innocent citizen is killed because of the Guard Captain’s actions, dismissal is the least of your worries. We’d have to throw you in a cell just to make an example of you."

I decided to escalate things further. "It’s even worse than that. Think about it. Do you really think a professional assassin would mistake a target's age and gender just because of a mark? That means there's a high probability that the person putting the marks on people and the person doing the killing are two different people."

"......You mean..." The Captain was covered in a cold sweat.

"That's right," I said in a casual tone.

"What if the client or the mediator puts that mark on the target, and the executioner is the one who does the killing?"

"Ah..."

"Captain you should be careful, that would be the same as you requesting a hit from an assassin. If you had no idea and happened to put the same mark on someone else, you might have an excuse. But since you knew it was a killer's mark and put it on someone anyway, it’s no exaggeration to say you're an accomplice."

The voices of the guards overlapped. "Will that get him the death penalty?" "Probably." "But the guy didn't actually have that intention, so wouldn't it be life imprisonment?" "Still, for someone in the position of Guard Captain, this is bad." "Yeah, definitely the death penalty."

Beside the soldiers who were talking amongst themselves, the Captain’s sweat increased as he muttered, ".....Wh.....What should I do....."

I had been waiting for that single line! I stepped in immediately.

"——There is a way."

"What!"

"What is it?"

As the Captain leaned forward, I said quite nonchalantly, "We just have to catch 'Sleepy Eye' before the incident happens."

".....You say it easily enough....."

"I don't think it's impossible. Fortunately, I’ve seen him and remember his build. And as you can see, this Lina Inverse has been through a lot; I can use offensive spells, and I'm confident enough that I can handle him the next time we meet."

At the mention of my name, one of the soldiers spoke up just as I had calculated. The Captain turned to him and asked, "Do you know her?"

"You don't know!?!? She's the sorceress who’s been rumored all over for crushing bandit gangs and such. They say she even uses dragon-slaying spells."

The Captain's face, as he turned back toward me, was shining with hope. "Then, give me a hand... help me!"

"For fifty gold coins in advance!"

"Fi....."

I had absolutely no intention or obligation to give him a discount. When I replied instantly, not only the Captain’s face but the faces of all the soldiers twitched.

"If you really want my cooperation, you can hire me and pay fifty gold coins upfront."

"Ah. uhm, uh."

".....That is..... no matter how you look at it, for information fees, it's too....."

I waved my hands dismissively at the mumbling Captain. "I'm saying I'll take the job. If you can't give an answer right now, forget it. Just be punished for your own actions as much as you like ♡"

When I stood up to leave, the Captain's voice immediately rang out. "Wait!"

The guards all started booing at once. "I thought so. But it’s a fact."

I easily brushed off the Captain's fury. "It should come out of the Captain's pocket money anyway." "It's his own fault." "Don't make the organization wipe your tail." "Why don't we just tie the Captain up in the middle of town with a sign saying 'Please hang him freely'?"

"SHUT UUUUUUP!"

The Captain barked at them, but to the person who had caused the whole mess by putting a strange mark on me, I wasn't about to give any more cooperation than my testimony.

"This is the responsibility of the entire guard unit for letting the Captain's recklessness go unchecked!"

"Don't YOU say that!"

Once again, blunt objects flew through the guardhouse.

"Anyway, about what we know regarding 'Sleepy Eye' over here."

The talk of investigative cooperation was settled, and with my pockets now warmer, I asked everyone. We all took our seats—there were spare chairs, but the Captain sat upright on the floor.

"When and under what circumstances was the mark applied?"

"......Well....."

"In that person's case——"

Ryker immediately threw a look at the Captain as if he were looking at a bug. "The Captain put this mark on someone else?"

"He was dead drunk the day before and it was there when he woke up the next day. In short, it’s unknown when it was applied. Even with the other victims until now, according to what they told acquaintances while they were alive, they just noticed it was there."

"All were strangled. The murders are carried out roughly five days after marking."

I furrowed my brows slightly. It felt like using a blade would be quicker.

"I see..... So, did you find anything from the ink lines?"

My jaw dropped. "Wait..... no way..... you haven't checked!?"

"Checked what?"

"What about commonalities among the victims so far?"

"None at all. Other than being killed by 'Sleepy Eye'."

Good grief, were all these guys gathered here really not thinking about the ink!!

"First, I'll ask: after the murder, he puts a black half-circle in the center of the marking that looks like a pupil, right?"

"Yes. Using something like a thick cord or cloth to strangle them."

I pressed my fingers to my temples. I decided to change the subject for a moment.

"I'll explain. To make a mark that won't come off with water, you'd have to get and use waterproof ink, right?"

"Well, people living normal lives don't usually use that kind of ink."

At my question, everyone went silent, and after a moment, the Captain puffed out his chest for some reason. "The ink..... is something wrong with it?"

Aside from those like sorceresses whose work is inseparable from reading and writing, for most people, tomorrow's meal is more important than literacy; many have no writing utensils at home. .....If they knew that, they should have noticed. While thinking this, I patiently continued my explanation.

"And 'Sleepy Eye' is using ink that won't wash off. I went to the Sorcerer's Association and checked, and the ink the Captain got is a special kind. So isn't it possible that 'Sleepy Eye' also obtained the same thing from the Sorcerer's Association in some way?"

As soon as I pointed it out, there was a collective "Ooooooooooh."

"I see!" "I didn't notice that!" "A blind spot!"

Everyone started splitting up for door-to-door inquiries.

No, it’s not. It’s more like, these guys are muscle-heads... I hadn't expected much in the way of wisdom, but honestly, at this point, I wanted to tell someone to wake up.

"Well, shall we all start by going to the Sorcerer's Association for the investigation...?"

At my question, which was tinged with fatigue, the soldiers—including the Captain—raised their voices with unselfconscious energy. "Yeah!"

The Captain and I ended up hearing from the sorcerer who made the ink. Inside the room we were guided to, there was a large tub big enough for several people to fit in, and for some reason, it was filled with gloppy black mud. It didn't look like an ink production site at all...

"This is the production site for the waterproof ink."

"Even for us, when we're making manuscripts, regular ink is fine. However, there are magic-related tools used in various places where that would be problematic. That's why we make this."

The sorcerer in charge explained as he set an empty bucket and a large bucket of water by the tub. He rolled up his right sleeve and, with a "Yo," plunged his right hand directly into the mud in the tub.

Immediately, the muddy water splashed up with a squelching sound!

"It's rare for someone who isn't a sorcerer to want this ink. I'm in charge of the production and distribution of the ink, and I haven't heard of any outsiders wanting it, except for that time with the Captain. Since it uses materials gathered locally, it's different from what other Sorcerer's Associations have. Other sorcerers might have personally given it to someone, but I wouldn't know about that. In any case, this ink is useless to an ordinary person."

The sorcerer pulled his right hand out without a care. We pulled back as he let out a friendly smile. Wrapped around his arm was a slimy, wriggling creature!

"Oh, it's okay. These are strange leeches found in the nearby marshes. Bizarre Leeches."

He plunged it into the water bucket. When he rinsed it lightly, it was a dark brown, flat thing about the size of a snake.

"Even though they're leeches, these guys only suck sap from tree roots and things like that; they don't harm people. Now, like this——"

He held the leech over the empty bucket, gripped what was either the head or the tail, and squeezed the body with his other hand. A black stickiness was spat out from the leech and landed with a splat in the bottom of the bucket.

"When you dry this and knead it with oil and such, you get ink that won't wash off——"

Without waiting for the sorcerer to finish his sentence, I shouted, "You smeared THIS kind of thing on me!?"

WHAM.

The kick I threw with all my might slightly deformed the helmet of the Captain standing next to me.

The sun set on the city of Quincy.

"Wh.....What are we going to do!!"

Against the madder-red sky, the Captain spoke, his voice tinged with the three colors of exhaustion, panic, and despair.

In the end, we hadn't gained anything that could be called a clue.

Of course, there are jobs other than at the Sorcerer's Association that use waterproof ink. People who paint shop signs or artists. We checked those just in case, but there was no breakthrough. Still, the ink that most closely resembled the one used by the real "Sleepy Eye"—the one first put on Captain Fatal's cheek—was indeed that ink from the Sorcerer's Association.

Time flowed heartlessly, and the sun sank into the west of the city. The faces of the group gathered on the street near the guardhouse were dark with anxiety.

"Night is coming! He will appear again! If a victim appears because of this..... what will we do!"

I turned a cold gaze toward the panicked Captain. "But it was your fault in the first place."

"I'm not saying there are no more options."

"Is there one?!? A way!"

I nodded as he asked with enough momentum to grab me. "Tonight, the Captain and I should act as bait."

"Ugh!"

".....Eh.....?"

Ignoring him as he froze with a visibly disgusted face, I continued. "Yesterday, 'Sleepy Eye' met me. So, there's a high possibility he believes I am the target and will aim for me again. However, if 'Sleepy Eye' realizes he got the wrong target, he'll surely check the rough characteristics of the person he's supposed to kill this time. In other words, there's a possibility that a man of similar age and build to the Captain will be targeted. The Captain and I will take walks at different times or on different routes to act as bait. Of course, we'll have everyone hidden here and there along the routes."

To that plan, however, the Captain shook his head heavily from side to side. "Noooo! Being bait is scary!"

"It's alright, Captain!"

Ryker said with a bright smile, "If you say you're really not up for it, we'll all cooperate to tie you up, expose you in the plaza, and go home!"

"Wait a minute! Are you guys all set on killing me!?"

The guards all nodded at the shouting Captain with the smiles of men who had made up their minds. I stepped in then.

"This is a decided matter. Your will doesn't matter."

"Wh-What!?"

"This plan has risks, but if you act as bait with backup from the others and we catch 'Sleepy Eye,' it'll be a great achievement. .....Well, that's if you do it willingly. So. Do you want to do it yourself or be forced? Which is better?"

Dissatisfied. From the bottom of his heart, he looked dissatisfied. He was silent for a while and then——

".....I'll do it. I just have to do it, right?"

In the end, that was what he said.

Even in a large city, once night falls and you leave the tavern streets, people suddenly vanish. It was the same in this city. If you left the main street, there weren't even streetlights around. The only lights were the moon and stars.

In that quiet night, I walked the path alone. Even though I was walking alone, the guards were supposed to be hiding at key points along the road. The Captain should also be walking fearfully on a different street by now, having discarded his armor and exposing the mark on his cheek, while being secretly watched over by the soldiers. If there was an attack, a whistle would blow.

FWEEET!

A whistle! I dashed toward the sound in a hurry! From various shadows, the hidden guards also jumped out and started running in the same direction! Among them was Ryker.

Running alongside me, he said, "The Captain is being attacked!"

"Looks that way!"

"Agreed!"

"In fact, it would solve a lot of problems if he just finished that guy off!"

As the guards spoke, we hurried through the streets and stopped at an open intersection.

The only ones there on the street, bathed in the faint glow of the lamps, were the single guard holding the whistle and the other soldiers who had gathered from all directions. And there, standing alone, was an old woman, trembling and confused, not understanding what was happening. She had silver hair and wore a white shawl.

"P-Please..."

".....Captain....."

The cold glares of every single soldier converged on the Captain. Beside them, Captain Fatal and several other guards burst out from a nearby alley, shouting, "What happened!"

I looked at the old woman, who was utterly bewildered.

"Wait a minute... This... this isn't funny at all."

I cried out in despair.

"What's the meaning of this?"

To the Captain, who asked without realizing the situation, I replied with a twitching smile while looking toward the old woman.

The soldier with the whistle, looking confused, explained, "This lady was passing by, and suddenly a shadow dressed all in black appeared behind her. I blew the whistle in a panic, and he vanished..."

"What on earth..... Mm!?"

The Captain finally noticed and let out a low groan.

".....Those..... the back of her hand.....?"

Following his gaze, the old woman, still confused, lifted the back of her left hand, which bore a mark consisting of a circle and two lines.

".....It was about two days ago... a soldier at the market put it on me, saying it was for some kind of inspection."

"Do you think this person... looks anything like me or the Captain?" I asked.

"No, not at all."

"Exactly. There’s no way to mistake her for us. Which means... that guy is targeting people with this mark indiscriminately! I don't know how many people in this city have this mark, but if he moves again, we have almost no way to stop him."

In the middle of the night, everyone simply stood there in silence following my despair-filled declaration.

(Stamp to Kill: To be continued)

Next Time: "Sleepy Eye" begins a campaign of seemingly indiscriminate killings. What is his true goal? And can Lina and the others stop him!? Personally, I think the plan Guard No. 1 mentioned—offering the Captain as a sacrifice—is the way to go! Anyway, next time: "Stamp to Kill" [Part 2]! Wait for it while doodling on your sleeping friend's face with a permanent marker!

Stamp to Kill [Part 2]

I don't even need to say how difficult... or rather, how impossible it was. As long as you all stay depressed and stop moving, you'll never be able to prevent it. There’s little time left. Everyone knew that. But...

"Don't give up. Never."

The soldiers remained unresponsive to my words. They sat in chairs in various slumped poses—not so much taking a break as simply rotting away. Outside the window was the refreshing morning light and breeze, but the air inside the guardhouse was heavy and stagnant.

Actually, I had formed a hypothesis regarding the identity of "Sleepy Eye." Even if we couldn't prevent tonight's incident, I was moving to prevent the next one and the one after that. However, I had no proof at all, and even if my hypothesis was correct, it wouldn't help me find the guy's location. So, I kept my mouth shut.

"Dealing with 'Sleepy Eye' by tonight will certainly be difficult. But if we fail, will the victims stop?"

The guards looked up.

"They won't. If that happens, then tomorrow, or the day after, or a few days later, 'Sleepy Eye' will create a new victim."

Before I knew it, everyone was looking at me. Ryker staggered over to me and said, "Please, become our Captain!"

Only two people shouted in surprise: me and Captain Fatal. The other guards joined in one after another.

"I’ve never said this to anyone before!" "I'd follow you anywhere!" "We don't need a figurehead coward for a captain!" "Someone like you is fit to be our leader!"

...Well, rather than praising me, they were mostly just venting their frustrations at Captain Fatal's uselessness.

The Captain's mouth twisted in displeasure. ".....Kugh."

"Hmph. Fine. It seems it is time for me to show that I, too, can do what a Captain should do!"

"WHAT!?"

The soldiers shouted in shock at his declaration.

"That's definitely impossible!" "The Captain doing something captain-like... that's like rebelling against God himself!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! If you say things like that, Lady Lina will be troubled! I don't care if Lady Lina is troubled, but I hate the idea of losing my job and being troubled myself!"

...Well, this Captain was honest, I'll give him that. But to be told that much by his own subordinates...

"Can you do it?!? Something like that!" "There's no way!"

Captain Fatal, despite the scathing remarks, wore a calm smile as a vein popped on his forehead.

"Hmph! Have you forgotten!?"

"Ohhh!?" the guards shouted.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked.

The Captain puffed out his chest. "That a Captain has the right to request assistance from other units! This city isn't guarded by our unit alone! There are four other units, and in an emergency, each captain can request help from the others! If we mobilize all the guards and use human-wave tactics, we might be able to prevent tonight's tragedy!"

"Ooooooooooh!" The guards cheered again.

"The... the Captain is sounding like a decent human being!" "Though in the end, he's just relying on other people's power."

"Say whatever you want, you grunts! You'll soon realize my true ability and popularity!"

With those words, the Captain laughed heartily and began writing letters to the other captains.

"Well, I think it's reasonable to keep following the lead regarding the ink, just like yesterday, but..."

The replies to Captain Fatal's letters came back before noon.

The reply from the Second Unit Captain: "I'd rather choose death than lend you a hand."

The reply from the Third Unit Captain: "Pay me back my money first. My sister hasn't stopped coughing since yesterday because I can't buy her medicine. Give it back. Then we'll talk."

The reply from the Fourth Unit Captain: "GRUDGE."

The reply from the Fifth Unit Captain: "A city that serves as the soil for a creature like you—no, foolish humanity itself—should just be destroyed!"

Someone placed a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to see Ryker shaking his head slowly.

"If we talked about every single thing the Captain has done, the sun would set. We don't have time for that."

Come to think of it, I was the one at fault for having even a shred of expectation for someone like Captain Fatal.

"Wow, you guys even call it a 'sin'?"

Ignoring the Captain's nonsense, Ryker sighed. "But the problem is what to do next... It’s become clear that praying to God is much better than relying on a dummy Captain. Though we guards aren't the type to just pray."

"What have you been doing all this time!?" I yelled at Captain Fatal, who was slumped on the floor in front of his letters.

His mention of "praying to God" made me think of something. I had been so focused on the Sorcerer's Association.

"Speaking of God, there was a reasonably large Ceifeed Church in this city, wasn't there?"

"There is... but are we really going to pray?"

"No, that’s not it. A church would be making copies of scriptures and various tools. Maybe they obtained a similar ink through a different route than the Sorcerer's Association."

"I see! In that case—"

"Let's start the investigation immediately!"

"YEAH!"

Strength returned to the guards' voices, if only a little.

As we moved deeper into the magnificent chapel, we found the monks' study room. It’s hard to picture a "study room," but essentially, it was where the ordinary monks performed the task of copying scriptures.

In the Sorcerer's Association, spellbooks aren't something many people see. Depending on the book, it could be dangerous if too many people laid eyes on it. But for the Church, it was the opposite. To spread the teachings, they needed as many copies of the scriptures as possible. Therefore, copying work was naturally part of an ordinary monk's daily routine.

In the large, simple study room, rows of long desks were lined up, occupied by a long row of monks.

"Put your soul into every single character! A typo is a blasphemy against God! If you make a mistake, you go to hell! Remember that!"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

The priest barked orders while walking behind them with his hands behind his back. The monks at the desks didn't even look up; they kept copying, their voices harmonizing as they worked without stopping their hands.

"You are all God's dogs! Be honored that as dogs, you can transcribe God's teachings for His sake!"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

"Write quickly and carefully! Follow the stroke order! Do not smudge the wet ink with your hand! Be careful! A pen has no value to live! Continue working!"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

It was less like a religious practice and more like a hellish boot camp.

I furrowed my brows at a name that sounded vaguely familiar, yet not quite.

"SIR, YES SIR!"

With that final shout, the only sound remaining was the scratching of pen nibs against parchment.

"Don't underestimate us! To hammer the absolute and universal teachings of God into the ignorant masses who know nothing of His truth, transcriptions of the scriptures are an absolute necessity! If we compare it to a warrior, it is the sword and the armor! A broken sword or shattered armor is of no use!"

The priest spun on his heel and directed a boastful smile toward me, Ryker, and Captain Petal, who had come to investigate.

"Or do you think you can fight villains with a twig for a sword and cloth for armor!?!? You cannot! It is the same for us! The teachings of God must be perfect! They must be absolute and firm, never fading, never running! Therefore, the transcriptions must also be immutable! The parchment is of the highest grade! Naturally, we use ink that won't run even if it gets wet!"

"Wait a minute! So you're saying—to ensure perfection—all the ink you use for transcribing here is the kind that won't wash off with water?"

At my question, the priest nodded grandly.

"Indeed! In fact, it was because you asked about waterproof ink that I brought you to this room without argument."

.....Well, I guess that makes sense.....

"So, do you make that ink here? Or do you get it from somewhere else?"

When I asked again, the priest looked a bit troubled and lowered his voice.

"Well... it's from the Sorcerer's Association."

Just between us, there’s a fairly deep connection between the Sorcerer's Association and various churches, including the Ceifeed Church. For example, newly developed recovery spells or medicines from the Association are sold to the Church; they’re good customers.

However, the Church doesn't like those details getting out to the public. Understandably so. If people found out that the miraculous healings performed by monks in a majestic temple were actually technology bought with money from the Sorcerer's Association, the sense of awe would plummet.

Of course, the Association understands these circumstances for their valued clients. Thus, there is an unwritten rule between both parties to avoid overt public interaction.

The reason I had forgotten about the Church at first, and the reason the priest had looked uneasy when asked about the ink's source, was due to those very circumstances. Therefore, it wasn't strange for the Church to be buying ink from the Sorcerer's Association.

"I think the sorcerer who was making the waterproof ink had a name like that," Captain Fatal remarked.

"Duston?"

I couldn't help but frown.

"Ryker, during yesterday's inquiries at the Sorcerer's Association, there wasn't any testimony about them supplying ink to the Church, was there?"

"There wasn't. Not from anyone."

What did this mean? It seemed I needed to go see him once.

Duston met us today with the same expression he had yesterday when we came to investigate. The location was the same as yesterday: the ink production area inside

the Sorcerer's Association building—the room where the tub holding the leeches that produced the raw material sat right in the center.

I went straight to the point.

"I've seen Sorcerer's Associations in many different cities, but I've never seen anyone making ink with such a... novel approach."

"Hahaha. Is that so?"

Duston didn't seem particularly offended; he let out a dry laugh and lowered his voice.

"I'm doing this a bit on the side to earn some extra pocket money, you see. There are people who make a face if you sell Association materials for personal gain. I source the raw materials for the ink myself, so there shouldn't be a problem."

"Ah. I see. That's how it is. Got it. Well, I'll keep that matter a secret from the Association then."

I laughed as I said it, and he laughed back. I looked at the tub.

"That's why I didn't mention it, but if I've caused you any trouble, I apologize."

"No, it's a help."

"Well, as for the quality, I manage everything strictly—from the feed to the mud quality and the temperature. As for the quantity, well, as you said, I can only get enough for maybe two ink pots a day."

"I see!"

I kept my smile fixed.

"In that case, that wouldn't be nearly enough ink to supply the Church, would it?"

The moment I said that, Duston froze.

"At the Church, they're using waterproof ink bought from you for their transcriptions. Every day, a whole crowd of monks is transcribing away. If you can only make about two pots a day, the math doesn't add up."

Duston remained silent.

"If you were making a large amount of ink directly, and if there was a creature that could produce it, earning pocket money would be much easier, wouldn't it? If your pocket money increases, it becomes research funding. Come to think of it, I heard from someone at the Association that you're researching Chimeras."

The guards standing behind me looked blank, seemingly unable to follow the conversation—but let's make it easy for him. I looked directly into Duston's eyes.

"I was thinking. Is it possible that 'Sleepy Eye' is a chimera you created—using the Bizarre Leech that spits out ink material as a base and trying to improve it... and that thing was the result?"

".....That's quite an imaginative story."

Duston said this while feigning composure. I nodded once.

".....Speaking of animals——"

"Yes. This isn't even a deduction; it's an imagination of mine that's almost a delusion. However, since the ink quantity doesn't add up, you must have a facility somewhere else where you can produce ink in large quantities."

Duston's face went blank. Silence was his answer.

"If my imagination is completely off the mark and you have nothing to hide, you should be able to show us that production facility quite proudly, right?"

"....."

Weak murmurs escaped his lips.

"The Ceifeed Church... asked about cheap waterproof ink... while trying to improve the Bizarre Leech..."

"Hey! So it's true, you... you 'created' it?!"

At Captain Fatal's question, Duston stumbled slightly and leaned his back against the wall.

".....It has a nature where it first strangles its prey, then sucks its blood, and leaves a black secretion where it fed."

"So that... is the 'Black Eye'!"

Duston nodded at Ryker's voice. I let out a deep sigh. I gave Duston a weary look.

"Why don't you stop with the clumsy lies?"

"Lies..... at this late stage....."

"You're telling them. You're acting as if it unexpectedly started sucking blood. But that thing curls its body to mimic a human form. Was that a coincidence too?"

Duston gave a small nod at my whisper, his face drained of emotion.

"The victims so far haven't had their blood sucked. More importantly, someone had to go around marking the victims with ink made from Bizarre Leech fluid, saying 'Suck this one's blood.' There's no one else but you who could have done that, right? Normally, you probably had it suck the blood of other animals to make the ink... but when you wanted to eliminate someone..."

Suddenly, Duston broke into a laugh. "Ha... hahahahahaha!"

The laugh from this ordinary-looking man was, however, decisively insane.

".....So? That means 'Sleepy Eye' is at your house or somewhere?"

"No. Usually, it returns home immediately after catching its prey, but it hasn't come back yet this time. No, no. It’s almost exactly as you say. It’s faster to have an oily raw material from the start than to dry the ink material and knead it with oil. And it’s more rational to suck blood from animals with higher nutritional value than from plants. Its mimicking a human form was truly an accident. But the moment I thought about hiding its form, the thing that was supposed to be an ink-making chimera turned into a killer. I saw how it took a human-like form and how it sucked blood from its prey, and I realized. That thing could be used for purposes other than making ink."

"I tried 'educating' it that way as a test, and it turned out it could be used."

He spoke in a tone as if he were making small talk, looking at Captain Fatal with a smile that could even be called gentle.

"A few nights ago... you were dead drunk and punched me... then you went and put marks on even more people. I never thought you would help me out by adding more marks yourself."

"Well, it's nocturnal, so I expect it will kill and suck the blood of someone you marked tonight and then come home. Do your best to find it."

"......Take him away."

At Captain Fatal's order, the guards silently seized Duston by both arms and led him away. Duston made no gesture of resistance.

The case hadn't ended with this. If a victim appeared tonight, we could catch the "Sleepy Eye" when it returned to Duston's house tomorrow. But of course, we couldn't just let victims be made!

Whether we could stop the creature without any casualties—tonight was the deciding battle.

The wind smelled fishy. The night streets, somewhat away from the center, were simply dark. In the sky was the light of the moon and stars. Beside me was a single bonfire. Illuminated by the faint light, I stood alone. I looked at the fire and exposed the "death stamp" on my arm to the night wind.

The motive Duston confessed at the guardhouse was nothing more than countless petty grudges. He rambled about "revenge against society," but in the end, it was just a story of him sending "Sleepy Eye" to kill anyone who annoyed him. There was absolutely no room for sympathy.

At any rate, I had to settle this stupid incident tonight, once and for all.

It was simply a matter of him sending "Sleepy Eye" after us. I felt absolutely no sympathy for him.

At any rate, I knew I had to settle this stupid incident tonight, once and for all.

I wondered how long I had been waiting silently in the night. The wind changed. Something very similar to human bloodlust—I wondered what kind of emotion it actually was. After learning the incident was Duston's fault, the sorcerers had readily agreed to cooperate.

...Sniff, sniff...

But for "Sleepy Eye," it was the ultimate fragrance. Lured by it, the creature had crawled out and shown itself.

A black shadow made a faint sound, perhaps flinching at the light or realizing it had fallen into a trap. Having learned its true identity, I could see it clearly in this brightness. It was shaped like a human, but it was actually a long, thin thing coiled around itself over and over, mimicking a human form.

The elusive murderer, "Sleepy Eye." Of course, it wasn't just the sorcerers surrounding this place. There were also many guards hidden in the shadows all around.

If the opponent were human, I would have thrown out a finishing line, but it was doubtful whether this thing could even understand speech. If so, there was only one thing I needed to say!

It took a while, but once its true nature was known, luring it out was by no means impossible. I turned around to see a single jar placed by the bonfire. The black figure—or what looked like one—was actually a mixture of that ink and animal blood inside the jar. In other words, it was the scent of the secretions from the Bizarre Leeches, which formed the base body of the "Sleepy Eye" created by that crazed sorcerer.

"It's here!"

The moment I raised my voice, numerous lights sprang into existence as voices cried out "Lighting!" from all directions. Even though I had been staring at the bonfire to adjust my eyes to the brightness, they stung a little.

Yes. "Sleepy Eye" tracked its targets based on the faint scent of human sweat mixed with its own secretions. It would find its target's location and suck blood from the very center of the mark—the center of the scent. It wasn't the mark itself that mattered, but the scent of the ink.

A blackness that existed outside of understanding, even before feelings of disgust or fear. That was the true form of "Sleepy Eye."

"Flare Arrow!"

I had already finished chanting the spell long ago! In response to the "Words of Power" I released, a dozen lines of fire born in the night rushed straight toward the standing black figure!

But at that moment! I didn't know if it had organs corresponding to eyes, ears, or a nose. However, as a result, the expanded figure writhed its entire body—and dodged every single one of the fire arrows I had fired!

"No way!"

Knowing its identity was a chimera based on leeches, I had imagined a long, thin, black object. But how could I describe what was spreading out in the night? Rather than being stunned that all my attacks were evaded, I froze because of its utterly alien appearance. If I had to say, it looked like a net woven haphazardly by a child. Or a piece of cloth full of holes, torn and worn out.

A kite!

The silver armor shone in the magical light. A longsword was drawn in his right hand. On his helmet was a plume—it was Captain Petal!!

"Hah!"

With a sharp shout, he kicked off the roof and swung his silver blade at the gliding "Sleepy Eye"! The "Sleepy Eye" dodged nimbly—and Captain Petal just kept falling! He was completely useless.

The ones who had released the light were the members of the Sorcerer's Association who had been hiding nearby. I had explained the situation, and the scent of the ink and blood being warmed by the bonfire—a fishy smell to humans—was the ultimate bait for "Sleepy Eye."

Did it throw knives from that black body? I thought for a moment. "Sleepy Eye," which had dodged the attack, lost its balance significantly in mid-air! Several small silver lights were sticking out of its writhing black body.

The moment I realized they were knives, several more pierced the night from below, stabbing into the "Sleepy Eye's" body! This was not something that could be done with average skill. But now was not the time to look for the owner of the knives!

"Sleepy Eye" completely lost its balance from that attack and fell while struggling! Right on top of Captain Fatal, who had fallen earlier!

Now!

"Flare Arrow!"

Fwoo-shoom!

This time for sure! My Flare Arrow scored a direct hit!

Screeeeeeech!

Was that an alien death cry? Or the sound of flesh scorching and creaking?

In the flames, many black ropes struggled and danced before finally stopping their movement. That was the end of the "Sleepy Eye," the chimera created by the crazed sorcerer.

"Wow. You were really a big help. The case was solved because you were here, Lina."

"If it weren't for your knives, it would have escaped," I said.

The next morning. As I was leaving, Ryker said those words while seeing me off. Yes, the person who had thrown the knives at "Sleepy Eye" last night was none other than him.

He bit his lip regretfully and looked over at Captain Fatal.

"No. But there's one thing that's a shame..."

"Despite taking a direct hit from Lina's fire, this man survived because the 'Sleepy Eye's' body acted as a shield..."

"Hey. Don't say such irresponsible things!"

I ignored the shouting Captain.

"That was my mistake... I'm biting my lip too. If I had just said, 'Look out, it's still moving!' and kept hitting it with attack spells until everything turned to ash..."

"It can't be helped. The Captain is a problem that we, the people of Quincy, have to deal with ourselves."

"I see... well... I think the road is long, but do your best..."

I turned on my heel and held out my hand to Captain Petal.

"Well then, I'll take the rest of my commission fee."

"Hey now! After all those terrible things you said about me!"

"The rest of the commission. Or my attack spell activates instantly. Choose."

And so, "Sleepy Eye" was defeated, and I got my commission fee. However, as long as Captain Petal is in the city of Quincy, a second or third incident that shouldn't happen will surely occur.

The dawn of Quincy is still far off.

(Stamp to Kill: End)

Self-Quest [Part 1]

The moment I opened the door, the men's eyes gathered on me.

The smell of cheap tobacco, cheap liquor, and cheap cooking oil mixed together, muddying the air. The lamps were poorly maintained and the glass was dirty, making the area strangely dim. If there were a "National Rough and Cheap Tavern Contest," this place would likely rank near the top.

There, I found the person I was looking for.

"Hey, little lady, is this a welcome party?" "Or did you come for business?"

I naturally ignored the typical heckling from the drunks. I knew that a beautiful young girl in a sorceress's outfit like me would stand out no matter what, but I pushed through the customers and headed for the counter. Some customers reached out to touch me on the way, but dodging a drunk's hand is something I can do before breakfast.

At the far end of the counter sat a man wearing a brimmed hat, sipping whiskey.

That was the person I was looking for. I sat in the seat next to him and looked at him.

He wore sturdy but filthy clothes. His black hair was starting to look ragged. He had a scruffy beard—an altogether oppressive appearance, but looking at his features, he was probably around twenty. There was likely no mistake. Even though there was no way he hadn't noticed my gaze, the man tilted his glass without even turning around.

"Antony Hicks, right?"

"There's no such man here."

What dwelled in his eyes was the color of nothingness.

I said, somewhat confused, "Mary-Ann was worried about you."

At the name I mentioned, a hint of emotion colored his eyes.

"—And you are?"

"Lina Inverse. As you can see, I'm a traveling sorceress. That's how I met Mary-Ann."

His mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "......Thinking about how I've made my parent worry, I'm a hopeless fool of a son. But even so, to end my mother's worry... I have to finish this no matter what."

Antony looked at me for the first time. Beneath his hat, his eyes burned with a flame of strong determination.

"This... 'journey to find myself.'"

"My son has gone on a journey to find himself. I'm worried he might go somewhere dangerous, so please find him and bring him back."

To be blunt, I had no intention of accepting such a stupid request. No, in fact, I hadn't actually accepted it. I had stopped at a Sorcerer's Association in a certain city during my travels. The Vice-Chairperson there was a woman named Mary-Ann, and she had called me in to make that proposal.

Of course, I refused. I kept my true feelings—that I couldn't be bothered with such a stupid son—to myself.

Until then. I couldn’t see what I wanted to do. I couldn’t see what I was suited for. It just wasn't coming into view.

Seeing that I had no intention of accepting the request, the Vice-Chairperson changed her tactics. If I were just a stranger, there was no way I would have known that the name Mary-Ann belonged to Antony’s mother just by hearing it.

She offered me a small amount of money and said this:

"You don't need to search for him by force, but if you happen to encounter him during your travels, please tell him his mother is worried. If you bring him back, I’ll give you a proper reward separate from this. This money is for your travel expenses—consider it a reminder. If you never meet my son, keep it as part of your funds."

All that was left was to persuade him to return home and collect the reward. By the way, Mary-Ann had mentioned the specific amount of the reward beforehand, and it was by no means a bad sum.

"A map?"

It was then. Someone, somewhere—I didn't know who—told me...

He nodded slightly, ordered another drink, and lowered his voice.

"About a year ago. There was a Lord Tishas who was driven from his lands for a crime he didn't commit and fled. I was told this is a map to the place where he buried... something he left behind."

He said it so casually, didn't he?

"It's probably an old unit of measurement. I don't know much about it."

"I mean, what exactly is buried there!? First of all, a 'journey to find oneself' isn't supposed to be like that! You're supposed to experience various things, and then choose what suits you from among them—that’s what finding yourself is!"

I shouted, "It’s not like someone else can just teach you, 'Here is your self'!"

To that, he replied, "Your 'mistake' might not necessarily be a mistake for me."

He calmly brushed off my rebuttal with words that didn't even form a proper conversation.

"I could explain, but—"

In the middle of his sentence, the air in the shop changed. I noticed it, and as Antony turned his eyes toward the entrance, three men were standing there gloomily. Even though it wasn't cold, they had the lower halves of their faces covered with cloth, and their sharp glares were directed right at us.

For a moment, I wondered if they had come for some pointless revenge—but no. The men's eyes were fixed on the person next to me—Antony.

Fine. I should just wrap up the conversation and leave quickly. I had fulfilled the minimum obligation of delivering the message Mary-Ann requested. Whatever happens to him after this, it’s the "self-discovery" he chose for himself, so it’s none of my business.

Having decided that, I relaxed my shoulders.

Even if I look like this, I have a lot of people holding grudges against me from all over. I thought they were that kind of crowd coming for me.

The three men stopped a short distance from us. Every one of them had their left hand resting on the hilt of a sword hanging at their waist.

"I hear you're on a journey to find yourself," one of the men said. "Give it up and go home, and we won't take your life."

"Ehh!?"

".....I figured something like this would happen eventually."

You *thought* it would happen!?

He wore a fearless smirk. "But you know. Without resolve, there’s no such thing as a journey to find yourself from the start."

The moment he spoke, Antony’s hand flashed! Reading the sign that he was about to do something, I ducked my head just as the wind whistled above me. What went flying was his half-finished drink. It slammed into the eyes of the three men.

"Gah!" "Ugh!" "You...!"

While they were struggling with the stinging alcohol, Antony vaulted over the counter toward the back of the shop! I followed right after him!

I was the one who cried out in shock, of course.

I mean, excuse me! Was a journey to find yourself supposed to involve interference from a mysterious group!?

Dazed, I looked back and forth between the men and Antony, but Antony was calm, lightly lifting the brim of his hat with his index finger.

".....Well, if you absolutely must find yourself using that weird map, I won't stop you... but where on earth did you get that map anyway?"

"Why are you following me!"

"Because I have momentum, that's why!"

We burst through the narrow washing area and out the back door into the night alley. Antony ran down the street, holding his hat with one hand so it wouldn't blow away.

"Why are you sticking your nose in?"

Once we had settled into a room at an inn, Antony asked me that first. It was the inn we took after the ambush. Anticipating that the group would be looking for us, we took three rooms, occasionally changing our clothes a bit and lying that our companions would arrive later.

We were currently in one of those rooms. Antony sat on the bed, and I sat in a chair placed opposite him. He looked into the distance as if he had understood something. However, I didn't understand a thing.

"Earlier, you said something like 'I figured this might happen,' but do you have any idea who those attackers were?"

I turned back to him as he turned away.

"Not a clue."

"Heh. You're pretty good, aren't you?"

Whistle.

Antony let out a whistle.

"This is no time to be impressed. Anyway, for now, we're changing locations."

"Got it."

The two of us ran through the night town under the crescent moon. Of course, we kept the windows closed so no one could see inside from the out.

At his question, I shrugged. "Mary-Ann told me to look after her son if I met him. Well, to be honest, I didn't originally plan on looking for you properly..... but since we happened to meet like this, I guess it can't be helped."

The reward I'd get if I brought him back—and the fact that interference had appeared—was also on my mind.

Antony exhaled a small, searching breath for a while, and finally, with a smirk, he turned a sharp gaze toward me.

".....Well, let's leave it at that for now."

"It's totally weird! Well, speaking realistically: the reason those guys attacked is because of the map you have, right?"

"The map?"

He raised one eyebrow.

"You know, obstacles are part of a journey to find yourself, right? So it's not strange for people like that to show up."

"It's incredibly strange! Why would someone appear to interfere with your self-discovery and try to kill you!?"

Naturally, there is no such convenient thing as a "map for finding oneself." That meant the map he had was a record of the location of something else. This was another incomprehensible story. I didn't say that much out loud, but I pointed out:

"The fact that people appeared to stop you means that for them, it's bad if you go to that place. Regardless of your reason for going there. In other words, that map must have some meaning other than the 'self-discovery' you're expecting. If it's okay with you, will you tell me how you got that map?"

"It’s nothing special. When I lost my sense of self and was complaining over drinks at a tavern—a man I didn't know who happened to be there gave me this map. He told me that if I went there, I’d find the reason for my existence."

"What is that...?"

At my murmur, Antony said with a troubled face, "I don't know what to tell you. That’s just how it happened, so there’s no helping it."

"Is it some kind of scam...?"

"I don't think so. After all, the map was free."

"Free?"

"Yeah. I didn't pay a single copper coin." He spread his hands to show me. "Back then, I looked just like I do now, drinking in a cheap tavern similar to the one before. I don't look like someone who has enough money to be worth swindling, do I?"

".....Well, that’s certainly true....." I muttered.

Of course, there was the possibility that a passing drunk had just teased Antony and given him a fake map. There were many such stories. However—at this time, another possibility floated into my mind.

Not all of them—I won't say all—but most of those stories are duds. Naturally. If there were truly gold, silver, and jewels at the location marked on the map, the previous owner would have taken them long ago. Knowing there is treasure and giving away the map to a stranger without trying to take it is almost impossible.

However—though very rare, it was a fact that there were exceptions.

One: if the indicated location was a place humans couldn't reach. Two: if the map itself hadn't been discovered until recently for some reason. But those two didn't seem to apply in Antony's case. And then there was the possibility of another exception.

What if the treasure wasn't gold and silver, but something dangerous depending on how it was handled? Legendary weapons or armor, powerful magic items, or magic books sealed away in secret. Regardless of whether they were truth or myth, there were many such legends.

Take magic books, for example. There are the *Manuscripts of the Otherworld* (Claire Bible), of which only fragments remain, or the *Abyssal Liturgies* said to be kept in secret by some sorcerer. Such forbidden treasures are strictly sealed for some reason, and sometimes guardians exist to protect them—or so they say. It’s also said that fools who target the treasure are given the punishment of death by the guardians.

Yes, just like the mysterious men who appeared before Antony today.

Of course, that didn't mean I intended to immediately conclude that Antony’s map showed the location of a forbidden treasure. But my interest in what was at that location was certainly piqued.

"Can you show me that map?" I asked.

"Sorry, but I can't do that. It would be a problem if you remembered the location, outran me, and found yourself before I did."

He was worried about *that*? What he was saying made no sense, but there was no point in nitpicking that here.

"Fine. Then just tell me this. Is the location on the map far from here?"

"No. Not really. It’s a place that wouldn't take many days... one way from here."

"Then it’s settled," I said, nodding.

Antony asked, "Settled? What is?"

I gave him a smile. "We’ll just have to go there. To that place."

He was speechless for a moment. ".....You sound like you’re coming along."

"That’s what I intended to say."

"Whoa, whoa. I know you’re skilled, but I can't pay you a guard's fee."

I heard from Mary-Ann that you left with almost no travel funds.

"Then... are you after a share?"

"No. A share of 'finding yourself'? I don't know about that 'ten million'of yourself thing, but I’m after the proper reward."

"If we're going, I'd like a share too. But to be honest, the deal is that if I bring you back safely to the city, Mary-Ann will give me a decent reward."

The village, surrounded by greenery, looked less idyllic and more like it was shrinking into itself, perhaps due to the steep mountains towering around it.

"Roger that," I said with a shrug.

The villagers' gazes directed at me and Antony were filled with curiosity and suspicion. Regardless of what the enemy's goal was, there was no doubt you were being targeted. They were the ones who told you to stop your journey, after all. At this point, the possibility of it being a case of mistaken identity was practically zero.

"In other words, even if there's nothing at the location on the map, I get a reward just for tagging along on your little excursion."

"I see. Fine by me."

He gave a fearless smirk.

"A mysterious map, a mysterious enemy, and a mysterious beauty offering her help... though you're a bit young to be called a 'beauty'—"

"Shut it."

"Anyway, this is finally starting to feel like a real journey to find oneself!"

I muttered that a journey to find oneself shouldn't be like this, but of course, he wasn't listening at all.

"So, what now?"

Antony had been leading the way, but until now, he hadn't shown me the map, let alone told me where we were going. I suppose it’s just common-sense caution.

"We’re going to procure some food here. It's a tiny village, but they should have at least that much."

It seemed that even at this stage, he still had no intention of telling me our destination. However, having come this far, I could guess. If there was no path leading out of the village, it meant we'd be heading into the wilderness from here on out.

Looking at the rugged mountains, Antony whispered, "Those guys haven't followed us since then. Did they give up... or was it a mistake after all?"

"No way," I replied. "They knew you were on a journey to find yourself. And you were talking about it so loudly to everyone, I'm sure they overheard."

To be honest, that was how I found him in the first place. When he was leaving a diner, I heard the lady there tell him, "Good luck on your journey to find yourself!"—though I couldn't tell if she was being encouraging or making fun of him. The enemies probably found him the same way.

"I doubt there are many other people out there loudly proclaiming they're on a 'journey to find themselves.'"

"What are you talking about? Everyone is always searching for themselves in one way or another."

"Maybe, but few people go around announcing it like that."

Even I started my journey because my sister told me to go see the world; depending on how you look at it, you could call that a search for oneself, I guess.

"If they're after you because of the map, they probably already know you're coming here and where you're headed next. It's better to assume they're waiting for us further ahead."

"Interesting. That'll give me more of a reason to try hard," he said, sounding completely carefree.

We eventually found a tiny general store. The old woman minding the shop watched us with the same suspicion and curiosity as the other villagers. When we brought a fair amount of food to the counter to pay, she glared at us from beneath drooping eyelids.

"You lot are planning to go into the mountains, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?" Antony asked. He was trying to hide his expression, but he might as well have said yes.

The old woman's brow furrowed deeply. "I can tell. But stop. Even the villagers don't go in there. Every so often, people like you show up and buy things, but no one ever comes back. There's a monster living in those mountains."

"A monster... you mean a Mazoku?" I asked involuntarily.

She turned her sharp gaze toward me. "I don't know what it is. But something is there, and no one returns."

As she spoke, she began moving the food we had selected back behind the counter. "So, I can't sell anything to you."

"Whoa, whoa!" Antony panicked.

I sighed and decided it was time to talk. "It can't be helped... I guess I'll have to tell you everything."

I turned to the old woman, putting on a serious face. "This is just between us, but the Lord has already heard about what's happening here. He's even discussing a plan to dispatch a subjugation team to deal with whatever is living in the mountains. But since we don't know what it is or how many there are, we can't form the team yet. We're here for the preliminary investigation."

Of course, it was a complete lie.

"H-Hey, is it okay to talk about that?" Antony joined in, playing along with my tall tale while furrowing his brows.

The old woman's eyes flickered with hesitation.

"I see. In that case, I won't take your money."

Now *I* was the one who panicked. If I got the food for free, it would technically be a scam.

"Uh well, your kindness is appreciated... but it might look suspicious if I let out a secret I was supposed to keep, so it's actually better if you take the money. And please, keep this a secret. Don't even tell your family."

The old woman sighed, looked down, and brought back the items she had just put away. "Alright. Just... be very careful."

"Thank you," I replied with a small nod.

The mountain was filled with the scent of green. It seemed the villagers really didn't enter, as there was no path, only occasional animal trails. As we treaded through the brush and over bare rock, the village soon disappeared behind the trees.

"Was it really okay to say all that?" Antony asked without looking back.

"It's fine. If there really is a monster, I'll just blow it away."

"Hmph. Bold words." He laughed, likely thinking I was joking. Of course, I was being entirely serious.

"Anyway, I have a proposal," I called out to his back.

"What is it?"

"Let's take a break once we find a place to rest."

"What, out of breath already? How pathetic."

"You're the one who's out of breath," I said with a wry smile. Honestly, I wanted to rest before entering the mountains, but the village had no inn or even a place that served food.

"I can use a spell to float through the air while carrying a person. If we rest somewhere and wait until night, we can cover the distance all at once."

"I wasn't told we'd be mountain climbing."

".....Fine, let's take a rest then."

"Ah, wait. We can't fly while it's light out; we'll stand out too much. If they're waiting with bows, we'll just be targets. My flight spell isn't for dodging arrows. So, we wait until night. You just tell me which way to go."

Antony sighed in response.

Suddenly, a presence appeared.

"Get down!"

I shouted and began my chant, but a shadow had already appeared behind Antony.

".....Hey... if you could do that, you should have told me sooner....."

"Eh?"

Antony was already pinned to the ground by the time he finished whispering.

"I told you to stop."

The man who had Antony pinned and was staring at me had his mouth covered with a cloth. He was definitely one of the guys who had tried to attack Antony at the tavern.

"If you won't listen to our advice, we'll have to make it so you can't walk—"

The man moved as if to break Antony's leg.

Thud.

A heavy sound echoed. A beat later, the man pinning Antony slumped to the ground. Another shadow stood nearby. This one wore similar clothes but had everything covered except his eyes, and he held a sizeable rock in his right hand. This newcomer had knocked the first guy unconscious from behind.

I had let my guard down, thinking they were just small-time thugs. But if this new guy could get that close without me sensing him until the last second, I needed to rethink the situation.

The new shadow looked at us and said, "Others will be here soon. Hurry."

He turned and vanished into the trees as quickly as he had appeared.

"Wait! You...!"

By the time Antony picked himself up, the man was gone. I wanted to wake up the unconscious guy and interrogate him, but it wouldn't be fun if the others swarmed us now. If they were all weaklings, I could just blast them, but both the attacker and the "ally" had been nearly perfect at hiding their presence.

"Was that him?" I asked, looking toward where the man had vanished.

"Yeah. The voice was the same. The guy who gave me the map. It seems we have a mysterious ally as well as a mysterious enemy."

"Looks that way."

Who were they? Why were we being targeted? I didn't know yet. But the answer had to be waiting for us at our destination.

"Well... for now, we'd better hurry like he said, Antony."

He stood up, picked up his hat, and we continued together into the trackless mountains.

(Self-Quest: To be continued)

Next Time: What do people see at the end of a journey? Hope for tomorrow, or the reality of today? Or perhaps the regrets of days gone by? When this journey ends, what will Antony find? Personally, I have a feeling he won't find anything at all. The one who gave the map, the ones trying to interfere—how will their various schemes conclude in the remote mountains!?

Next time: **Self-Quest [Part 2]**! Wait for it while wondering whatever happened to those old variety show travelers!

Self-Quest [Part 2]

As I entered beneath the trees, the already faint light was further obstructed by the branches and leaves. I retorted at his half-moon-like density, but he remained unperturbed, carrying the light of the half-moon and stars upon his back.

".....It’s pitch black."

"There's no mistake that this is North. But right now, I have no idea how fast we’re going or how far we’ve traveled. Even with Antony right here, he looks like nothing more than a shadow in the darkness."

"A night in the mountains is just like this. Wait a sec. I’ll prepare a light with a spell."

"Hold on! If you use a light, won't we be giving away our position? What if wild dogs or something attack us?"

"If something like that comes, I’ll just hit them back—"

I certainly had the memory of being attacked just before this. I felt around for a stone of manageable size and muttered a spell under my breath.

Lina had ended up traveling with Antony after a mysterious man handed him a "map for finding oneself." Using magic to fly through the sky, we headed toward our destination. We had taken a break in a secluded spot to eat, waiting for the sun to set before moving out.

"Light."

I cast a lighting spell on the stone, keeping the brightness very low to make the duration last longer.

Then, these obstructors appeared before the two of us, trying for some reason to hinder the journey. As we flew, I wondered how much the wind was affecting our speed.

".....Are you sure this is the right way?" Antony let out a pathetic voice.

I wrapped the stone in a handkerchief, and an instant lamp was ready. I looked for a suitable spot nearby and sat down with my back against a tree trunk. Antony also sat a short distance away.

I started to crack a joke, but I went silent right then. In the darkness, I sensed a presence.

"—What's wrong?" Antony asked, lowering his voice as he sensed something unusual from my behavior.

Since we departed, I had been controlling the spell. The light was faint, like a firefly, but to eyes accustomed to the dark, it was enough to make the outlines of nearby objects stand out.

"I'm moving with the stars as my guide, so at the very least, we're heading North just like you said."

Suddenly, the obstructors attacked Antony again! But another man appeared, defeated them, and left. From his voice, Antony claimed that man was the one who gave him the map. What were their intentions? What lay at the location on the map? Without knowing the answers, we delved deeper into the mountains.

I thought for a moment and said, "I'm sure we've covered quite a bit of distance, but..."

"So, how much further should we go?"

"How about we head down for today and camp somewhere suitable?"

In response to my question, Antony held his hat with one hand and said, "I don't know that either. We'll check the surroundings in the morning, confirm our location, and start again."

"Yeah. Sounds good."

Waiting for his reply, I controlled the spell and lowered our altitude. I threaded through the treetops, searched for a flat area of ground, and landed.

"This is plenty bright. Why go through the trouble of using a handkerchief?"

"If it’s bright, we can be seen from quite far away. Don’t forget there are people trying to interfere with us. Besides, there's no need to give away our location with a light when we might have been able to slip past them by flying."

But at that moment, the presence I had felt vanished. It would have been easy to dismiss it as my imagination, but I stood up slowly.

".....Let’s change our resting spot. I felt something. If it was just my imagination, fine, but if not, there's a chance we'll be attacked in our sleep."

"I.....I get it."

Apparently, he really hated the idea of a night attack. Antony stood up obediently.

"Anyway, we’re resting here for today."

In the morning mist of the mountains, a man's sneeze echoed, devoid of any charm or atmosphere.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah."

".....Well, we'll start the real search once the mist clears—"

A gust of wind blew. Antony shivered in the cold, yet he answered with forced energy. The mornings and evenings in the mountains were cold. I was fine because I had my cloak, but his outfit must have been a bit rough.

In that instant, part of the white mist was blown away.

"So, Antony, even if you say we're searching, is there some kind of landmark?"

When I asked, he pulled the map from his tunic. Still being cautious, he spread it out sneakily so I couldn't see. "I want to find a place where a large rock shaped like a fish is standing."

".....At this rate, we won't see much....."

The two of us looked around. It would probably clear up as time passed, but the morning mist was still thick. Only ten steps away, the scenery dissolved rapidly as if melting into diluted milk.

"Oh!"

Whether it was me or Antony who cried out, I couldn't tell. The trees ahead broke away, and the view opened up. At the bottom of a bowl-like basin, there was a tiny, tiny village. On the edge of a rocky mountain a short distance away stood a tall, large rock.

".....A fish rock..... huh."

".....Yeah."

The wind brought the mist back in, filling our field of vision, but there was no mistaking what we had just seen.

"I mean, there was a village, right?"

I saw it too. "Yeah. Probably..... wait, could the place on the map be—"

The map didn't say anything about a village, though. Anyway, let's go see."

Of course, I had no objections.

"Hey, give me a break. I'd hate for the punchline of this 'journey to find myself' to be a village of bandits."

".....Still talking about that....." I sighed and looked at him. "I told you, there's no such thing as a map for finding yourself in the first place. Or what? Do you think the moment you step into this village, you'll suddenly find this 'self' of yours?"

Antony and I began to move toward it through the morning mist.

".....So? Why are we sneaking around like this?"

Keeping some distance from the village, we hid in the thicket. Antony questioned me in a low voice.

"I told you, we don't know what kind of village this is." I replied in an equally low voice.

"It’s marked on a weird map, and it doesn't connect to any highway. In short, the people here are living hidden on purpose. Thinking of it that way, a bandit settlement is a possibility."

"Hey, hey. You’re saying that now, after coming all this way?"

"Now or whenever! I’ve been saying that from the start!"

"I didn't hear you."

"You definitely didn't seem interested in listening! But that's not my fault!"

Just as I reflexively raised my voice—

At the sudden third voice, Antony and I snapped our eyes upward. Just beyond the thicket where we were hidden, a woman stood there. I wondered just when she had approached. She had well-defined features, but due to her simple clothing and somewhat damaged black hair, she gave off a plain impression. At first glance, she looked to be in her mid-twenties, but she might have actually been a bit younger.

"By any chance, are you travelers?"

While Antony and I remained frozen, she continued to speak to us.

"Ah... well. We're travelers, or rather, we got lost. We were wandering around and ended up here." I stood up and scratched my head, playing along.

Antony chimed in, "We were arguing about whether it was okay to just walk into the village without permission."

The woman smiled.

"Is that so? You must be troubled. If you like, I can prepare a simple meal at my house. Why don't you come over?"

Now then. Should we step in or retreat? In the moment I hesitated—

"That's kind of you. We'll take you up on that offer." Antony answered without a second thought.

Oh, this guy! Without even asking me!

Well..... it couldn't be helped now. I steeled myself and followed the woman into the village along with Antony.

In the end, the banquet involving the whole village didn't finish until quite late at night. The villagers welcomed us warmly. They begged us one after another to tell stories of cities and travels, and while we were answering their requests, food was served and alcohol appeared.

...Well, both were simple, but they were by no means bad. While doing all that, time slipped away. It was past noon when they suggested we stay in the village for the night and return to the city tomorrow.

Then the banquet truly began in earnest, and the conversation blossomed with all sorts of stories. After Antony spoke fluently about how he was on a journey to find himself, the villagers dismissed him in unison, telling him to just get a job.

I was the one left speechless this time.

Currently, it was just the two of us, Antony and me, in the house we were given to sleep in. There was no sign of anyone outside.

".....But you've got some nerve, haven't you?"

Amidst the flickering flame of the lamp, I sat on a somewhat rickety chair and spoke to Antony in a hushed tone. He remained standing, leaning his back against the wall near the entrance, pushing up the brim of his hat with his fingertip.

"I'm sorry, but I don't give rewards for compliments."

"Rewards aside, seriously, you're something else. A normal person wouldn't even think of stepping into a place this dangerous."

At my words, he remained silent for a moment before knitting his brows. "Dangerous? What's dangerous?"

He still didn't get it...

"I mean, the fact that this village is extremely dangerous."

"Those kind people?"

I dropped my shoulders heavily. "Listen. Do you think it's normal for people living in a place like this, seemingly avoiding the public eye, to accept total strangers like us without a hint of suspicion and give us a massive welcome? Does that ever happen?"

I stood my ground as the tension in the air turned razor-sharp. If the villagers were plotting something, it was a certainty now. The moment we stepped into this village, I knew there was a chance we'd be surrounded and beaten to a pulp.

"That's not it... you were the one who said 'let's go,' so I just went along with it," I muttered.

In all likelihood, they had known we were coming and had held a meeting to coordinate. They probably decided to "welcome us kindly." Of course, if they had tried to attack, I had every intention of turning the tables on them with offensive spells.

"That's impossible, right? Even if you say that, it's not like we sent a letter saying we were coming, or like we were invited—"

"We *were* invited. By the map," I countered.

At my words, Antony crossed his arms, dripping with cold sweat. "W-well, whatever the case, I can't find myself if I don't move forward. I moved forward because I thought that. That's all there is to it."

"Maybe, but the fact that they welcomed us means they were allies in the end."

"Welcomed us, huh...?" At my remark, he fell silent, his mouth half-open.

"I don't know if this village is connected to the one who invited us or the one who tried to hinder us. I thought maybe we caught them off guard by flying in... but remember last night? I told you I felt a presence and that we should change our resting spot. That probably wasn't my imagination; we really were spotted by someone. By someone from this village, most likely. Because that word got around, they were able to come meet us this morning and welcome us with those beaming smiles."

Well, if I hadn't noticed, I suppose it might have looked that way. The villagers and I had been talking pleasantly the whole time... but they were constantly throwing out feelers to dig for our purpose, and I was asking questions to try and grab any hint about what this village really was. In reality, it was a constant battle of wits. It wouldn't have been a surprise if they'd lost their patience and put poison in the food.

"To be honest, I’ve had cold sweat running down my back almost all day."

Antony, on the other hand, didn't seem to have noticed a shred of it, appearing to fully enjoy the hospitality of the "kind villagers." Though, there was a possibility that because he acted so bold and oblivious, the enemy overthought things, assuming we were hiding some kind of trump card, and thus didn't make a move.

"That was the situation...?" His voice was slightly hoarse.

"In any case, the real work starts now. It's certain this village has some kind of secret. Probably to the north."

"North?"

"Yes. North. When I was talking to them, the villagers reacted strangely to the word 'north.' I'm planning to scout that area under the cover of darkness, but they might use the darkness to pull something on us too. It would be bad if we acted separately, so you’re coming with me, right?"

At my words, his legs shook slightly, but he gave a strained laugh. "...Well, I'll go along with it, thinking of it as part of 'finding myself.' I guess finding yourself isn't easy..."

It was a short while later. A chilly night breeze brushed against my skin. We had slipped out of the house. There was no sign of anyone around. The houses lined up in the village seemed to be fast asleep.

However, in this particular case, I couldn't really rely on my intuition for sensing presences. Since getting involved in this matter, I had failed to read the enemy's presence several times. Just this morning, I hadn't even noticed a woman approaching the bushes. I didn't know the cause, but something felt off. Regardless, I just had to be careful.

We headed north, weaving between houses as if crawling along the bottom of the night. There was no sign of anyone following us, but was there truly no one there?

"I hope you're not going to say... 'let's try digging,'" he whispered.

I ignored his quip. In the night sky surrounded by peaks, there was only the light of the moon and stars. It was almost too bright for someone trying to move stealthily. It didn't take much time to pass through the small village. There was a modest field

where the branches and leaves of some tall crop swayed in the night wind. Passing through that—

Antony and I stopped at the same time. Beyond the field was bare ground. There, long, narrow stones were lined up in a row.

".....Don't you think there are a lot of them?" I asked.

"—Of what?"

"The number of new graves." My voice felt like it was soaking into the dark night. "Compared to the scale and population of the village, there are too many gravestones that look new. Don't you think so?"

Antony gasped at my observation. They were simple gravestones made of natural stone. While their shapes and sizes varied, I could tell they weren't decades old.

".....Was there a plague?"

"If there was, they'd carve names on the stones."

"Then what on earth are these?"

I didn't know. I didn't know, but it would be faster to ask directly!

I chanted a spell at high speed and, as I spun around, I unleashed a Fireball.

"Fireball!"

The ball of light exploded upon impact, dyeing the night a crimson red! In that split second, several black shadows dodged and scattered in four directions. They were almost certainly the villagers. Even if my intuition was acting up, I could certainly notice when such blatant bloodlust was directed at me. They were hiding in the shadows of the crops, the trees, or the gravestones. I wondered just how many presences were lurking at a distance.

"W-what are you doing!"

I didn't answer the flustered Antony and looked at the spot where the blast hit. I frowned despite myself. There were multiple sources of bloodlust. I thought for sure one or two people would be scorched and lying on the ground at the spot where the

density was highest, but only small embers danced in the darkness. I had fired a shot right at them.

Not a single figure was there. Could it be—they all dodged that? If so, what the hell are these guys?

The only thing I could say for sure was that we and the villagers were now completely hostile. At that moment, I saw them. Several surges of bloodlust were surrounding the two of us.

"What's the meaning of this! Hey!"

Antony must have finally noticed the killing intent, as he shouted into the darkness. But there was no way an answer would come back. I put my hand on the hilt of the short sword hanging at my waist and began chanting a spell under my breath—but before I could move, a shadow raced through the darkness!

The shadow came from beyond Antony! Did they plan to use him as a shield against me? But that was within my expectations! I activated the spell regardless!

"Flare Arrow!"

Over a dozen arrows of flame appeared, not in front of me, but on the other side of Antony! The rushing shadow couldn't stop suddenly! It charged straight into the flames!

The shadow let out a scream as it was scorched and fell back. In that instant, I saw the form of the opponent burned by the fire.

"A Werewolf!"

Antony's voice and mine harmonized in the night. Even an ordinary person would likely know that name. A protruding jaw with pointed ears. A body covered in black animal hair. A being between man and beast, possessed of high regenerative abilities and power several times that of a human.

Even when you say "Werewolf," there are actually several types. Those who are half-beast from the start, those who transform due to a trigger, or those who can control the transformation by their own will. The people of this village were likely the last pattern.

...I see. No wonder I had been failing to read their presence. Their presence was closer to that of a beast than a human. As long as they remained calm, their presence would blend into nature. However, if they were shaken by something or held blatant hostility, it was entirely possible to read them.

The presence from last night was likely one of the scouts who found us near the village and was surprised. In any case, there were ways to deal with them!

While chanting a spell, I feigned a jump to the side and then did a forward roll toward the shadow coming from the left! The opponent couldn't react in time and instinctively swung an arm, only to disturb the night air! I used that split second to complete the spell—

"Freeze Arrow!"

I unleashed a dozen arrows of cold at the back of the shadow I had just passed! One hit one target, and two hit the other! I hadn't finished them, but their movements should be slowed now!

The Werewolves' screams echoed, and a threatening growl drifted through the darkness. Antony's voice was trembling. It certainly wasn't an easy situation. But?

"They're growling to try and shake us. In other words—we've fought back more than they expected, and now they're hesitating."

They might think they could win if they all attacked at once, but none of them wanted to be the first to charge in and become a victim of an offensive spell. No matter how high their regenerative abilities were, it didn't mean they didn't feel pain or that they were immortal.

There was no way Antony could understand that. Inexperienced in such things, he looked around restlessly into the darkness.

"Dammit, what's going on?! The end of a journey to find myself is a werewolf village?! What the hell is with that map!"

To that question, which shouldn't have had an answer, a woman's voice unexpectedly spoke from the darkness.

"—That map."

At that moment, a shadow ran from a different location! The target wasn't me, but Antony!

"Freeze Arrow!"

The cold arrows I fired struck the leaping shadow directly!

"Wasn't it that guy who gave you the map?" I shouted, pointing at the opponent I had just struck. It was a baseless guess, almost a total shot in the dark. However, I was starting to get a general idea of what was happening. "Both he and I heard the voice of the man who gave him the map."

I threw the words out and began chanting another spell. A cold atmosphere, different from before, flowed among the Werewolves. As the fallen Werewolf tried to pull himself up—

"...Say something. Jed."

The same woman's voice from before spoke. It belonged to the woman who had appeared to welcome us this morning. The Werewolf called Jed froze. He didn't answer.

Under the thin moonlight, the silence continued. "I will take your silence as an answer," the woman's voice said.

Jed snapped his head up. "Wait! I—"

"—There's no mistake." Antony's murmur made Jed freeze again. "That's the voice of the guy who gave me the map."

It was certainly the same voice as the man who had defeated the one who attacked Antony shortly after entering the mountains. Simultaneous with Antony's words, the shadows of the village swarmed Jed! They dragged him beyond the bushes, and then... silence.

The tense night air felt painful. Unable to bear the quiet, Antony muttered, ".....What... is going on....."

He probably intended it as a monologue. But.

"You were set up by Jed."

The woman's voice came from somewhere in the darkness.

"We Werewolves are beings incompatible with humans. That is solely because we sometimes eat humans. But if we continued to do so, the human military would eventually move, and it would turn into a full-scale war. To be honest, we don't want to fight people like... Miss Lina over there. We tried to choose a path of living apart from humans."

To use a human analogy, it was like a secret agreement to stop eating beef.

"The existence of the village must remain a secret to humans. Therefore, we had no choice but to give warnings to those who tried to head here, and to 'process' those who came anyway."

"Processing—you mean—"

Had they been hindering us all along? If that was the case, it certainly explained why they couldn't just explain the situation and ask us to stop our journey.

Antony's tone turned bitter. He looked out over the long row of gravestones and whispered, ".....Did you eat them.....?"

The woman's voice dodged the question. ".....People began to abuse the system. They would go into human settlements and tell foolish people that they had a treasure map, giving them something with the location of this village marked on it."

I see. Even if it's forbidden, there are always those who just have to have their beef; I suppose it's the same for them as it is for humans.

"Those who are driven by greed after getting their hands on a map come to this village without telling a soul. When that happens—we are forced to dispose of them. It has happened many, many times. But if we keep repeating this, a problem will inevitably arise. That is why we were investigating who was handing the maps to humans."

I understood. Those investigators had found out Antony had a map and moved to intercept his journey.

".....Jed was one of those investigators..... I intend to punish him sufficiently for breaking our laws. But since an incident of this magnitude has occurred, we can no longer live here. We are—leaving this village."

Simultaneously with the woman's declaration, the presences surrounding us began to retreat, one by one. I canceled the spell I had been chanting.

"We will likely never attack humans again. We only wish to live in peace."

The woman's voice faded into the distance. Hmph. Is that all she had to say? I walked up to Antony's side and, instead of the interrupted spell, I unleashed a brand-new shot!

"Dragon Slave!"

The destructive power, capable of slaying even a Great Dragon, instantly turned the dark night into day. Crimson light swallowed the village and scraped away the mountainside. Whether the enemies screamed or not, I couldn't tell over the roar. Even protected by the magical barrier generated during the spell's activation, a fierce wind whipped around Antony and me.

When the wind died down, all that remained were the ruins of a village more than half-blown away and the gouged earth. There was no longer any sign or presence of the Werewolves. If they had taken a direct hit from that blast, they would have been blown to smithereens without a trace. I couldn't deny the possibility that a few had escaped—but there was nothing to be done about that.

".....That’s some incredible magic....."

In the darkness where the echoes of the explosion had faded, Antony muttered as he looked at the cratered earth.

"But they said they just wanted to live in peace. Was there really a need to go this far?"

At his naive comment, I replied in a bitter tone, "Hey, were you actually listening to what that woman said?"

"I was listening."

"Then let me rephrase it for you. 'As long as there's no harm to us, we have no hesitation about eating humans. We ran away because a tough opponent showed up, but if you guys were weak, we would have made a meal of you.'"

Antony fell silent. Only the night wind swept through the mountains.

"I’m sure the part about wanting to live in peace was sincere. But if you leave them alone, they’ll just build another village somewhere else. And then the same thing will happen all over again. I’m sorry for them, but I couldn't just overlook it."

We returned to the city Antony originally came from about three days after the events in the mountains. Now, all that was left was to take him to his mother at the Sorcerer's Association, collect my reward, and be done with it.

The city was bustling today as well. People and stalls everywhere. Sometimes a crowd can be annoying depending on my mood, but after everything that happened, this liveliness felt comforting.

".....I’m probably going to get chewed out by my mother when I get back," he muttered with a strained laugh as we walked down the street.

I laughed too. "If you tell her you were attacked by Werewolves while 'finding yourself,' she might actually faint."

I leaned my hand against the wall of a nearby house. Even so, I managed to look up and said, ".....Actually, my knees just went weak..... That thing you just said, it’s exactly what I told you at the very beginning."

"Was it?" he said, letting it slide quite easily.

Oh, is that how it is...? Is this a case of—

Seeing my reaction, his wry smile deepened. "But well..... this trip wasn't a complete waste. I figured out a lot of things."

"Such as?"

At my question, he looked up at the deep blue sky. "That there's no such thing as 'finding yourself' when it’s given to you by someone else. In the end, finding yourself means trying a lot of different things and choosing the one that fits you best. What's wrong? Why'd you stop so suddenly?"

If I had just listened to myself from the start, I could have settled this whole thing without any trouble or exhaustion!

Dragging my body, which had lost all its strength and will, I walked with Antony toward the Sorcerer's Association.

(Self-Quest:End)

Family Portrait

"Ah!"

I cried out as it hit me. I felt like I had heard that voice somewhere recently.

"Miss Lina? Isn't that Miss Lina?"

When I heard my name and turned around, I found myself on the main thoroughfare just before noon. The street was lined with stalls and crowded with people—but I didn't see a familiar face in the direction I turned.

"Ryker!!" I tilted my head slightly.

".....Um....."

The man who spoke with a wry smile was actually much closer than I expected.

"Did you perhaps forget about me?"

At his words, I looked the man over and searched my memory. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. Short black hair and an ordinary face. Medium build, but he had a fair amount of muscle. He wore rough trousers and a jacket. At his waist was a single sword, likely for self-defense. Since he was carrying a rucksack, he seemed to be traveling, but... who was he?

Not to brag, but I, Lina Inverse, have trashed countless thugs on my travels. Naturally, I don't remember every one of their faces, but he didn't have the air of someone coming back for revenge.

Then I remembered. In a city called Quincy where I had stopped, I got caught up in an incident. The person I met then was him, Ryker, a member of the guard.

"Correct."

At his smiling face, I gave an apologetic laugh. "Haha. Sorry, sorry. Since there wasn't a weird mark on your face, I—"

"Hahaha. This is the part where I'm supposed to get mad, right?"

Well, I mean, I couldn't very well tell him his face wasn't that distinctive, so I just waved my hands dismissively. "That was a joke. Back then I only saw you in your guard armor and helmet. You look different in private clothes. Anyway, what are you doing in a place like this?"

At my question, Ryker's expression immediately clouded. "…….Captain Petal has gone missing……."

"…….Ah……"

The moment I heard that, I felt my face twitch. The person who had dragged me into that mess in Quincy was none other than the Captain Petal he just mentioned. He was an old guy with a lot of problems, and his reputation among other captains and subordinates was the absolute worst. Since Ryker was his subordinate, I could only offer my condolences.

Doubtless that old man had caused trouble again, but I said, "Actually, wouldn't Quincy be more peaceful if he stayed missing?"

Ryker nodded seriously at my opinion. "I agree with you on that point. But the problem is that he disappeared in the middle of official business while carrying documents he was supposed to deliver to the Lord. It's been quite a while and he still hasn't arrived, so we've received an inquiry from the Lord. Thanks to that, I've been stuck searching all over the place. Just in case, I have to ask, you haven't seen the Captain nearby, have you, Miss Lina?"

I shrugged. "Unfortunately, no. You've got it rough, don't you?"

"Haha. I guess I just have to accept it as fate. Well, I'm going to continue asking around here for a bit."

"Good luck. If by some miracle I see that old man, I'll tell him Ryker is looking for him."

After exchanging social pleasantries, Ryker headed toward a nearby inn. I was about to enter a nearby eatery for lunch when—

"He's eating there right now with a woman and a child!"

"What did you saaaaaay!?"

Ryker’s scream echoed through the midday inn as I dashed inside.

"Eeeeeeeeeh!!"

A girl about five or six years old was sitting there clutching a stuffed animal, looking alternately at Captain Petal and Ryker. This was a face I didn't know.

Cornered, the Captain didn't panic in the slightest. He remained firmly seated and nodded. "Um. Well, you see—"

"I don't want to hear your excuses! You're going to give me a proper explanation right now!"

The man looked to be in his mid-thirties. He wore casual, bright-colored clothes. Short blond hair, sturdy build. He looked like a man proud of his strength, and I recognized that square jaw.

When we met before, he was in his guard armor. If I hadn't run into Ryker just moments before, I wouldn't have noticed him even if I’d entered the same shop. Captain Petal. The Captain of the First Guard of Quincy, and the man loathed by everyone in the city. I myself had been put through a lot of trouble by this old guy.

Next to the Captain was a blonde beauty who appeared to be in her mid-twenties.

"Even if it costs me my soul!"

The Captain actually raised his voice at being told off so bluntly.

"I did say that! But I feel like my soul gets dirty just listening to you! If you have a reason that makes sense, fine! But in the first place, I was supposed to deliver documents to the Lord on official business! Whether you walk or take a carriage from Quincy to Metroze City where the Lord is, it takes days! So what’s the problem with bringing my family along for the ride? It's on the public dime anyway!"

This old guy really just said that!

"Wait... what...?"

Ryker chimed in, a blue vein popping on his forehead, though he kept his retort relatively mild. "No. At that point, you're already out."

However, the Captain immediately shot back, "It's a difference of perspective—no, a difference in lifestyle, Ryker-kun! I am a man of the 'family-first' principle! In other words! It's perfectly fine for work to be my second or third priority!"

"That’s exactly why I'm saying it's not okay!"

Ignoring Ryker, who had finally raised his voice in anger, the Captain continued, "Therefore! If I follow my family's requests during the journey and stop here and there, I must say it is unavoidable for my official duties to be delayed!"

"Are you even a government official!?"

"You're wonderful, dear," the woman said with a smile, and the little girl added, "I love you, Papa."

Ryker was fuming, and as the woman and the girl spoke up, I, who had been standing next to Ryker watching in silence, couldn't take it anymore and opened my mouth. "............Um. I think I might be mistaken, but..."

I cast a wry smile and looked at the woman and the girl. "Listening to you, it sounds like you two are Captain Petal's family."

I heard the sound of my own brain cracking.

Petal’s. Captain's. Family.

Individually, these words were pronounceable by humans, but the moment they were combined, the concept transcended human understanding. As I stood there in confusion, the woman kept her pleasant smile.

"My name is Floresia, wife of Quart Petal. And this is our daughter, Muse."

"Big sister, are you a friend of Papa's?"

Holding a brown stuffed animal—perhaps a dog—the girl looked at me with sparkling eyes that bore absolutely no resemblance to the man beside her. I turned to Ryker. "Um... Quart Petal...? Who's that...?"

When I asked, he wouldn't meet my eyes. "............Regrettably... that is Captain Petal’s full name."

"No way!!" I screamed despite myself. "A 'Petal' Captain having a beautiful wife and child!? Has God died!?"

"Who are you calling Petal! And you went as far as saying God is dead!?"

True. It was true that in this world, couples formed that made you tilt your head and wonder, "Why these two?" Nevertheless, I refrained from blasting the Captain into pieces with an attack spell right then and there, mostly because I thought little Muse might get a bit mad at me.

"......Anyway," I said. But—faced with such a cruel and irrational reality, I stood there stunned. Beside me, Ryker muttered under his breath, "......And apparently, the wife is head over heels for him....."

I couldn't help but sink to my knees.

"They're asking if the letter is ready yet," Ryker squeezed the words out. "The request has come from the Lord. I don't care about the public funds or the family coming along anymore, but I'm going with you to make sure there's no more loitering. Captain, you're going to deliver it right now."

At his unilateral declaration, Captain Petal’s complexion changed. "W-wait, Ryker-kun! Not like this...! On a private family trip..."

"You're the one who said it was official business!! —That’s right! Lina-san!"

Ryker barked and turned bloodshot eyes toward me. "Could you please lend a hand in escorting—or rather, taking the Captain into custody—to the Lord's place?"

Captain Petal made some noise beside us, but of course, this was no time to pay attention to that. After all, I was in the middle of negotiating terms for an important job.

"Mama, what’s happening?"

"The nice big brother and sister are coming along because they're worried about Papa."

I ignored the family conversation, where communication seemed somewhat dubious, and focused. "I see. So the request is to escort the Captain! Dead or alive, right!?"

"Wait a minute! That’s not an escort!"

"Exactly! Or rather, feel free to find a suitable excuse and aim for 'dead'! As long as the letter eventually reaches the Lord, everything will work out! The commission fee will be deducted from the Captain's salary!"

The sight of this 'happy family' stirred a dark feeling in my chest, and pushed by that annoyance, I immediately gave a thumbs-up! "Something about this is irritating, so okay!"

"Wait a minute, you guys! Are you fully intending to kill me and make it look like an accident along the way!?"

The Captain said something, but of course, I didn't care about his will!

"If any factors appear during the journey that obstruct the smooth execution of official duties, it’s fine if I crush them without hesitation, right? Even if that factor is the Captain himself who suggests loitering!"

"Perfectly fine!"

And so, I took on the job of Captain Petal’s forced custody... I mean, escort.

When I was a child, everything was new and sparkling. Everything I saw and heard was fresh, and I felt that something incredibly interesting was waiting at the end of every road I hadn't traveled before.

I suppose it was because I once felt that way that I didn't scold Muse for asking such an innocent question as we traveled along the road, swaying in the carriage.

"Hey, Papa. What’s down this road?"

The Captain was the one handling the reins at the driver's seat. It was a four-seater with a folding hood, which allowed Ryker and me to ride along. The Captain had actually prepared a carriage just so he could use official business as a cover for a family trip. Thinking that they probably chose this four-seater while having some sappy conversation like "we want lots of children" made a murderous intent swell up

inside me. The horse apparently belonged to the Captain, but that didn't make it any less annoying.

Currently, the hood was folded down, so we had a good view of the surrounding scenery. When the landscape was nothing but green, Muse would gradually get bored and talk to her stuffed animal, but her eyes sparkled when she saw a fork in the highway.

In response to the Captain's answer from the driver's seat— "Um. If you go a long way down this road, there's a city on the water called Crimson." —Muse's eyes went wide. "A city on the water!? I want to see it!"

The Captain turned around with a smile over his shoulder. "Hahaha. In that case—"

He must have noticed the murderous intent radiating from Ryker and me. He hurried to face forward again. ".....In that case, I'll take you there someday! If we go now, my life might become slightly endangered!"

If the Captain had smiled and veered off course right then, I could have turned him into charcoal while saying, "Now, now, you mustn't do that." If Ryker and I hadn't been in this carriage, the Captain would have headed for Crimson without hesitation. Just being able to prevent that was enough for now.

The carriage continued on the road to Metroze City without straying. Since it was a one-horse carriage, it didn't go very fast, but at this pace, we would likely arrive tomorrow afternoon or evening.

A peaceful highway. Overflowing green, birds singing, and bandits waiting ahead.

"Hey, Papa. Who are those people?"

"Umu. Probably bandits. But don't worry. Ryker-kun and Lina-kun are here for times like this."

"It really was a good thing we had them join us."

While the family had their peaceful conversation, men looking like thugs stood up one after another from the roadside ahead. There were roughly six or seven of them. As the Captain slowed the horse, the men blocked the road, and one of them shouted.

"You there! You have the letter to the Lord of Metroze City, don't you!?"

"What...!" Ryker’s and the Captain's voices harmonized.

I had thought they were just bandits out for money, but there was no way such people would know about the letter. In that case...

".....How do you know about the letter?" I asked from atop the carriage, as there was no point in feigning ignorance now that they’d shouted it out.

"That doesn't matter!" The man glared at the Captain with eyes glinting with murderous intent. "More importantly, you, what the hell were you doing and where!? There are more people than I heard! And you should have passed through here five or six days ago! We've been waiting here the whole time!"

At that pitiful statement, the Captain stopped the carriage. "Um! I was having a leisurely trip with my family, making stops along the way!"

"Wow, that’s irritating!"

I understood how he felt, Anonymous Villain Number One. My eyes met Ryker’s, and our hearts communicated instantly. The plan was set! I immediately gave instructions to everyone!

"Leave this to the Captain alone! We’ll go on ahead!"

"Leave it to—hey, wait a minute!" The Captain, who had almost nodded in the heat of the moment, realized what was happening and called for a halt. "Why am I the sacrificial pawn!? In this situation, normally you guys would hold them back and let us go ahead!"

Ryker responded with calm composure to the protest. "If we did that, Captain, you'd likely abandon us and take a family trip to Crimson."

"....."

While we were bickering, the attack spell I had been chanting exploded! "Fireball."

Dbooooooom!

The men, who apparently hadn't considered me a threat, were blown away by a direct hit!

"Wow! Papa! Look! The people flew like bugs!"

Without even being startled by the explosion, Muse offered a terrifying observation with sparkling eyes. Floresia cast a gentle gaze toward her. "If Muse is a good girl and works hard, someday you'll be able to blow people away like insects just like the big sister."

"Yay! I did it!"

...It’s not really my place to say this, but... please try not to encourage that.

Ryker looked over the scorched, fallen men from the carriage and said, "Well then, shall we tie these guys up and ask who hired them?" He started to get up.

"Wait!" I hurriedly stopped him.

These men were after the letter to the Lord. Aiming for something like that meant there was a high possibility of some kind of conspiracy. But to be honest, I had absolutely no intention of getting involved in a complicated story like a conspiracy. I just wanted to escort the Captain, blow him away with an attack spell two or three times if the chance arose, and get my commission fee.

If we interrogated the men here and the names of big shots—like a rival Lord or a high official—popped out, things would get seriously troublesome. Naturally, I wanted no part of that. But if I said that honestly, I felt like the serious Ryker would argue back. Therefore:

"That was way too easy. If they're this weak, they're probably just sacrificial pawns. Even if you interrogate them, you won't get any useful information. I doubt you'll get the real name of the person who hired them. More than that, what we need to watch out for is if the enemy's goal was to use these guys as pawns just to slow us down. Either way, wasting time here isn't a good move. If you say we can't just leave them, we can just report it to the guards at the next stop. Anyway, leave these guys alone and let's head on!"

".....I... I see."

"Um. Understood!"

Convinced by my smooth talking, Ryker and Captain Petal agreed, and leaving the men where they were, the carriage began to move again. At least, I felt a sigh of relief inside.

However, It was a fact that they were pawns hired by someone. If so, there would likely be another attack before we reached Metroze City. I wondered if a chance to blow away Captain Petal along with the attackers would come then. With various thoughts swirling, I was swayed by the carriage...

Dinner becomes lively just by having one child around. We were all gathered around the same table in the dining hall on the first floor of the inn. We had taken a room in a small town and left the carriage at the inn. After turning the tables on the attackers, nothing else had happened. If things continued smoothly at this pace, we would reach our destination tomorrow.

Muse looked at the dishes lined up on the table and ate this and that, while Floresia occasionally chided her manners.

"That was delicious!"

"Now, now, Lina-san."

Muse ate a little bit of everything until she was full, then she put her hands together and gave a polite little bow. She hopped down from her booster seat and started trotting away.

"Muse! Don't run around, you'll bother the other customers!"

"I'm gonna go get Mr. Fox!"

Responding to Floresia's warning, Muse began to climb the stairs leading upward, one heavy step at a time.

So that stuffed animal was a fox, huh.

I had spent about half a day with them, and the air surrounding the family was remarkably peaceful.

".....You all really get along well, don't you?"

When I muttered that, Floresia gave me a flower-like smile.

"Yes. Thanks to all of you."

"I don't buy it!"

Floresia and Captain Petal both looked surprised at my outburst.

"Because—!"

I bit my lip and muttered.

"You guys..."

Next to me, Ryker gently pressed a hand on my shoulder as I hovered halfway out of my seat, trying to press the issue.

"I understand why you can't accept it. Even for me, when I think of Captain Petal at home, I can only imagine him laughing manically while tearing his kid's stuffed animals apart for no reason before and after meals."

"What kind of father is that!? Ryker-kun, just how do you view me!?"

The Captain protested in various ways, but Ryker ignored him.

"However! No matter what we imagine, reality remains reality. It’s painful... but accepting reality is also important."

To the sullen Captain, Floresia said with a giggle, "Hee hee, darling, they're just saying these jokes because they're jealous of you."

No, we aren't.

Was it better to clear up Floresia’s misunderstanding—or rather, her delusion? I started to open my mouth—

"Um, excuse me. Excuse me."

I noticed Muse had come back. But the stuffed animal she had gone to get wasn't in her arms. She looked at Captain Petal.

"I think someone is in our room. I heard a noise. That's why I didn't bring Mr. Fox."

We instinctively looked at each other. A noise in a room where no one should be? There was the possibility of a paranormal phenomenon, but right now, a different calculation felt more likely. Without a word, everyone stood up from the table. With me in the lead, we headed up the stairs toward the room on the second floor that the Petal family was using.

As we approached quietly, a small sound indeed leaked from behind the door. Yes. It sounded exactly like someone rummaging through things. I glanced back at Ryker and the Captain, who were following me, and nodded.

I kicked the door open!

The sky, painted with the remnants of twilight, peeked through the open window. And in the middle of the room stood an anomaly. That was the only way to describe the figure. A black cloak hung from its back. It was tall and spindly. Colored stones were tied to its neck, wrists, and ankles. The short garment covering its torso was adorned with characters and symbols that looked like otherworldly talismans.

But what drew the eye most was the face. A large, folk-style mask was painted in various primary colors, so distorted that it bore no trace of an original shape, with eyes and a mouth that looked like gaping black holes. Several slips of paper were stuck to it.

The sight was so bizarre that Ryker and the Captain cried out from behind me, but the two of them didn't seem particularly disturbed.

"What? It’s just Captain Accord."

"Um. He's a man of somewhat peculiar tastes."

"I told you I'm not him! I'm someone else entirely!"

The Mask desperately denied it, but Captain Petal said flatly, "What are you talking about? You often dress up like that to perform tricks at our drinking parties, don't you?"

"That’s wrong! Look closer! This is a different mask than the one from that time!"

Admitting it was a "different mask" was basically a confession that he was the same person, but the man himself didn't seem to notice. He focused his gaze on me through the mask.

"More importantly! You should have the letter to the Lord."

"Um. I have it right here," Captain Petal said, nodding with incredible honesty.

"That letter... hand it over."

"Well, I don't mind."

The Captain spoke so casually that he began to reach into his pocket and took a step forward—

"Wait just a minute!"

Naturally, I called a halt.

"What's wrong?"

"'What's wrong?' What do you think you're doing, just handing it over like that!?"

"I don't see why not. He's a colleague."

"I told you I'm not a colleague!"

The Masked Man—I mean, Captain Accord—insisted on that point.

"Why are you doing this, Captain Accord!?"

"Accord, what do you intend to achieve by this!?"

"...Hmph! Fine! In any case, I'll take that letter when the opportunity is better!"

He barked and immediately kicked off the floor, leaping out the window! I ran to the window and leaped out after him without hesitation! From the height of a second floor, I could manage the landing even without magic. I kicked off the ground, chasing after the fleeing Mask.

If I could take this guy down here, it would save us a lot of trouble later!

We landed at the back of the inn. Night was beginning to fall over the town, and there were almost no people on the streets. Chasing the black cloak, I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Wasn't it you who had those thugs attack us during the day?"

"What if it was?"

The Mask admitted it easily, making Ryker and Captain Petal gasp. But the "words of power" carried on the wind didn't belong to me, but to the Mask!

"Wind Brid!"

He swung his arm as he turned! To the naked eye, nothing happened. But I knew what this spell was! It was basically a wind version of the Flare Arrows or Freeze Arrows I often use. The range isn't very long, but the scariest part of this spell is that the blades of wind are invisible.

You can't dodge a spell you can't see. I had no choice but to leap far to the side, throwing myself out of what I assumed was the spell's trajectory.

However, the Mask was no longer there. The sound of something breaking echoed behind me. A stray shot must have hit something. I began the pursuit again, but I had been pulled away slightly.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Over a dozen arrows of cold air tore through the night! Just as it looked like they were about to pierce the Mask's back, he suddenly changed course, turning a corner into a side alley! Every single shot missed!

I chanted my next spell and followed! However, if I jumped into the alley carelessly, I'd be intercepted by the enemy's magic the moment I turned the corner. I ran past the mouth of the alley at full speed first, checking the interior as I passed. I hurried back to the entrance and looked closely, but there was no sign of the opponent hiding nearby.

He had probably turned the next corner, either right or left. But my spell was ready too! I unleashed the blow toward the cloak fleeing through the twilight!

We had drifted a bit too far apart... I could have caught up if I used high-speed flight magic, but overextending myself right now wasn't a good plan.

I gave up the pursuit and turned back. As I walked, I thought about the Masked Man. Ryker and the Captain said he was their colleague, Captain Accord. But the Masked Man himself had insisted he wasn't.

Could it be that the Masked Man had lured me away to circle back and attack the inn!? I dashed back toward the inn! When I ran through the alley and out onto the main street, the front of the inn came into view.

A crowd of onlookers had gathered at the entrance. Captain Petal and his family were among them. The light from the lit lamps illuminated the inn's sign and the entrance, carving an orange space out of the night. Two shadows stood facing each other!

The Masked Man and Ryker!

It seemed everyone had come out to the entrance to check on me, only to run right into the returning Masked Man.

And since I knew Captain Petal had earned quite a few grudges from the other captains, what did this mean? Was this incident fueled by Captain Accord's personal grudge? No, if that were the case, he wouldn't need to be so obsessed with the letter to the Lord. Was there a mastermind behind the scenes using that grudge?

Suddenly, a commotion arose from the inn. Ryker held several throwing knives between his fingers, watching for an opening.

"Why are you taking Petal’s side?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm just trying to fulfill my duty of delivering the letter to the Lord! Setting aside the harm you want to cause Captain Petal, I absolutely cannot hand over the Lord's letter!"

"If it’s just harm, then fine!"

At the Mask's retort, Ryker responded without hesitation, "I wouldn't go that far!"

"...I wasn't complimenting you..." Ryker groaned.

By the time he raised a voice of shock, the Mask had closed the distance in an instant and moved inside Ryker’s guard—and then!

He should have been empty-handed, but in each hand, he now held a short wooden sword! Captain Petal tried to butt in from the side, but both Ryker and the Mask ignored him.

Anyway, this would settle one thing.

"...My purpose is officially to get that letter to the Lord!"

"Then I can't overlook you either!"

The Masked Man hesitated for a second, then I lunged at the Mask!

Clang!

A hard sound rang out, and a silver blade fell to the ground. Ryker’s hands had flashed as he prepared to fight! The silver light he unleashed reflected the lamplight as it flew through the air—

"Fireball!"

D-boooom!

The blow I unleashed immediately blew the Mask away, along with Ryker. The Masked Man was sent flying and collapsed at the inn entrance, where the crowd surrounded him. Meanwhile, Ryker, though blown back, twitched and looked up.

".....Li.....Lina-san.....?"

I immediately flashed him a V-sign!

"Muse!"

Just as I thought it was over, Captain Petal’s voice and several screams rang out. I looked over to see the Masked Man had stood up and was holding Muse in one arm!

Dammit! Did he still have enough strength to move?

"Don't move!" The Mask's voice blocked my movement as I prepared to strike.

"Lady Sorcerer! Keep your mouth wide open! If you even look like you're chanting a spell, you know what will happen to this girl—hey, wait. Little girl. Could you not touch the mask? No, don't shove your hand in there! Not there! My eye! My eye!"

This was the ultimate technique! A soul-sapping defensive evasion that silenced all complaints by inviting a retort!

The man forcibly pulled away Muse, who was rubbing the mask with great interest, and turned toward Captain Petal.

"Now! Even if you hand over the letter to the Lord, I won't let you go! If you refuse—"

".....I understand....."

With that, Captain Petal took a folded, sealed document from his pocket.

"Hand it over. Slowly."

The lamp flames swaying overhead cast eerie shadows on the mask. In this situation, neither I nor Ryker could move. Captain Petal held the letter at the tip of his outstretched right hand and walked slowly toward the Mask. The Masked Man held Muse in his left arm and reached out his right hand to snatch the letter from the Captain!

At that moment!

"The mask—"

Muse grabbed the edge of the man's mask and pulled!

It froze for a split second.

Whether it was the angle or the fact that I'd blown him away earlier and loosened the straps, I didn't know. The mask slipped off with pathetic ease, exposing the face of a black-haired man hidden beneath! The air turned cold.

"The mask—♪"

"———Wha...!?"

At Muse's voice, the man hurriedly released the girl and covered his face with his free left arm. "".....Gh..... You saw...!"

I hurriedly began to chant a spell.

"Ice Lance!"

The unleashed cold extinguished the fire and froze Accord's feet to the floor. However, Accord didn't flinch in the slightest now. He stared down Captain Petal with even a hint of a smile on his face.

"It's over. It's over, Petal!" he declared.

Beside him, Muse was busy playing with the mask, so the sense of tension was somewhat lacking.

"Since you've seen my face, I can no longer make any excuses. But! Petal! You've also failed in your mission to deliver the letter to the Lord! If the reason I obstructed your mission was out of a grudge against you, your responsibility will naturally be called into question as well!"

"A grudge... you say!? What on earth have I ever done to you!"

"You've done plenty! A lot!"

At Captain Petal's oblivious remark, Accord's eyes twitched. "I won't let you say you've forgotten! The 'Disaster of the Appointment Ceremony' that happened because of you! And that 'Tragedy of the Summer Training Camp' too! No! If I were to speak for the feelings of the other captains as well as myself, I should mention the 'Chestnut Gathering Elegy' and the 'Mount Haru Snowy Mountain Death March' incident as well!!"

Captain Petal's life was apparently a literal cycle of spring, summer, fall, and winter tragedies. Hearing a mountain of her husband's scandals, Floresia's voice trembled.

"I had heard that being a Guard Captain was a job where it's easy to incur resentment... but I never imagined it was this much..."

"Resentment? No, it's not resentment!" Accord's soul-cry didn't seem to reach Floresia.

"I see. By aiming for the Lord's letter, you were trying to hide your motive of a personal grudge and escape yourself," I deduced.

"Exactly!" Accord answered my reasoning.

".....Though for all that effort, your identity was revealed pretty much instantly..."

Anyway, now that the letter had turned to ash, your days of doing whatever you want as a Guard Captain are over, Petal!

Accord had the face of a man who had accomplished something at the risk of his own life. But then—

".....Um.....? Do you not know... Captain Accord.....?"

Ryker, who was still lying on the floor, spoke up. He looked a bit hesitant to address Accord, who was wearing a winner's gaze. "......Captain Petal's wife... even though her last name has changed... she's the Lord's fourth daughter..."

"Eh?"

Accord and I harmonized without meaning to.

".....Lord Metroze comes here to see his daughter and granddaughter every time he has a chance... I mean, he'd prefer it if they did it at their own expense, but... this time, because the Captain was loitering on the way... the Lord got impatient and sent a letter asking for them....."

".....Wait a minute," I said in a slightly hoarse voice. "Then... what about the letter to the Lord.....?"

At my question, Ryker answered with a bitter expression. "Using the delivery of a letter as an excuse... it was just a pretext to call the family... frankly, it was just the Lord wanting to see his child and grandchild... but since he can't do that on the public dime... he used the letter-delivery as an excuse... so... it's not really a document with any weight at all....."

"What did you say!"

If you took it even further, it meant Floresia's father—the Lord himself—was just as bad as the rest of them. It was a terrifying thought.

".....Eeeeeeeeh....."

Behind a sullenly retorting Captain Petal, Floresia was pretending she hadn't heard a thing, playing with Muse.

Accord's groan was far too sad.

Looking back, it made sense. After causing so many problems and scandals, there had to be a reason Petal remained a Guard Captain. That reason was likely that his wife was the Lord's daughter.

".....Then..... everything I did..... was all for nothing....."

Accord's knees buckled, and because his feet were frozen, he ended up sitting right there on his backside.

But then—

".....No..... it was not for nothing."

It was Ryker who spoke with strength. ".....Even if you fall here... someone who has inherited your will... will surely accomplish it someday...!"

I doubted Accord's soul-cry reached Floresia, but Ryker's words were certainly passionate.

The decision on Captain Accord's punishment was to be made at a later date, and I never learned the result. I only sincerely hoped that he would be treated with leniency and that one day he would get his revenge on Captain Petal.

The next day, without further incident, we delivered the Petal family to Metroze City, and I received my commission fee. With that, my role in this matter was over.

.....Still, this was an incident that gave me a lot to think about. Almost no one would dispute the theory that Captain Petal was a failure as a human being. But I also suspected that Floresia's influence was a major factor in the formation of that personality that transcended the limits of uselessness. I couldn't help but feel a little worried about what kind of future awaited Muse, growing up between those two.

(Family Portrait: The End)

Afterword

Author: Summer has arrived! Oh, summer is here, summer is here!

L: Yeah, yeah. Since it's summer, I guess you're going to talk about that "True Ghost Stories" book again.

Author: Don't say "again"! Actually, as of the time I'm writing this afterword, the ghost story book hasn't even come out yet!

L: Which means if it *were* out, you definitely would have made it the topic.

Author: Bu—... anyway, putting that aside! So, I present to you *Slayers Special* Volume 27, "Stamp to Kill"!

L: Volume 27, huh? It's a bit of an awkward number to get sentimental over, but thinking back, we've been doing this for a really long time.

Author: Indeed. These years and months have only been possible thanks to the support of the readers and many others.

Author: Speaking of years and months, the TV anime versions of *Slayers*, *NEXT*, and *TRY* are finally being released as DVD boxes. It's been ten years since the first anime aired.

L: Wow. Has it really been that long? But if the DVDs are coming out again now, does that mean—

Author: Your screen time isn't going to increase.

L: What!! Let's increase it! I'll definitely be a hit! The moment a Demon King appears, I'll manifest out of nowhere, smack them from behind with a folding chair, and make them sit in *seiza* while I lecture them for an hour! Then I'll grab them by the collar and drag them away. Everything solved! You wouldn't even need Lina and her friends!

Author: The plot would be a total mess.

L: Well, while I’m lecturing the Demon Kings, the "protagonist" could just be playing Othello in the corner of the screen or something.

Author: No protagonist does that!

L: Then... how about a split-screen format where the bottom-right screen shows tomorrow’s weather forecast!

Author: ...

L: With a caption saying "Please wait a moment."

Author: Don’t give me that "I just had a nice idea!" face!

Author: First of all, fundamentally, that would turn it into a completely different story! We'd have to do a massive remake!

L: No, not a remake—more like a special bonus for the DVD. Like a "Multi-Ending" feature common in games! People could watch whichever one they like!

Author: I don't think we can make enough variations based on the premise of you showing up.

L: It’s fine, it’s fine. We can do it. Like that folding chair lecture pattern I mentioned. Or, right at the climax when the Demon Kings and high-ranking monsters appear, nothing happens at all, leaving the protagonists confused. Then the screen cuts to the Demon Kings at a yakiniku restaurant in Tsuruhashi, drinking Korean liquor and complaining!

Author: They're that blue-collar!? What kind of user demographic are you trying to please with an ending like that!? Besides, the DVD box is ultimately about releasing the TV version. If we mess with the story, we're negating the whole project!

L: Hmm. I guess that’s true.

Author: So, it would be more in the spirit of those recent digital remasters—like making only the vertical rolls on Zangulus’s hat into beautiful CG that wiggles around?

L: No one’s gonna be happy with that!

Author: Well, the boxes actually include newly recorded CD dramas as a bonus.

L: I see. So. In other words. You had the chance to record something new, yet you didn't use your authority as the original author to make a part for me? You didn't make any sales effort at all?

Author: Uh... I'll just write "Here lies the man who fought bravely against the corners of a DVD box and lost" on my tombstone.

L: Anyway, speaking of "Please wait a moment," you don't see those TV broadcast interruption cards much lately.

L: It's a shame my screen time didn't increase for the DVDs, so I guess my million fans living in Sumatra will just have to settle for watching the scene in *NEXT* where I descend, possess a small chested girl, and then leave on a 24-hour endless loop.

Author: Wow, that sounds genuinely painful...

(Please Wait a Moment)

L: See you all next time!

(Afterword: The End)

I've finished the translation for you! Is there anything else from the *Slayers* world you'd like me to look at?